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December 2005

Another year has come and gone, and we find ourselves back in December, ready to celebrate the holidays, winter solstice...or just the cold weather. Things aren't cold here at Deep Magic, though. In fact, they're smoking hot! Thanks in large part to our interview with George R. R. Martin, the October issue has received record downloads for us, topping out at well over 5000. The Robert Jordan interview has also generated great numbers for the November issue. Rather than have it be an aberration, I hope we can build on these numbers and make Deep Magic even more successful.

This month's cover features the fantastic work of Nick G. Deligaris, with an interview and more art found inside. We also have the artwork of Steven Kenny featured for your enjoyment.

The first story this month is *Infestation* by Ian Creasey. Ormrod is a dragon killer for hire, but this job is much more than he first thinks. Next is *The Lost Hemingway* by Mark Reeder. Mark takes us into an alternate reality where a detective searches for a priceless treasure and dodges dead bodies along the way. Our final story is *Mark of a Saint* by Amy R. Butler, prequel to *The Saintly Fianche of Malitane*, which was published in our June 2004 issue. Fianche must choose between being a mother and a Saint...or maybe she'll figure out a way to do both...

In addition to the stories and artwork, Mark Reeder offers some insight on world building, a fundamental aspect to all fantasy and science fiction writing.

That should do it for the December issue. Keep a lookout for another notice during the month of December, when we hope to release a special issue of Deep Magic available to subscribers. This issue will offer stories from more than a dozen authors. There is no release date yet, but it should come out sometime in December.

Thank you once again for downloading Deep Magic. Stop by our forums for a chat, and please consider supporting Deep Magic by purchasing a one-year membership. See our website for details. Above all, have a great holiday season!

All the best,
The Editors

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. All are welcome to participate. We select a small number of submissions each month for publication (we don't offer compensation for challenges).

To submit a challenge, go to our submissions system. You will need to create an author profile and account. Please note the deadline date.

December 2005 Writing Challenge
Entries due Jan 10, 2006

The year is coming to and end, and time remaining in 2005 is short. With that as our inspiration, here is your writing challenge. Make a list of things done in small units of time, like naming a pet or a child, breaking up with someone, washing the dishes, playing a game, going to a party, etc. Now, develop a short story of under 1000 words and stay within the confines of that time, making sure it fits within a science fiction or fantasy setting. Amaze us with your attention to detail, but more importantly, with your attention to time.

Selections from the October 2005 Challenge

He Who Laughs Last
Ice Runner
The Temple of Saint Alquin
The Treasure in Haunted Cavern

The above stories were selected from the October challenge, which was to thrill our readers with a well-crafted fight scene.

Don't forget the November challenge due Dec 10:

The challenge this month is to do what is so often counseled: write what you know. We've all had things happen to us that were out of our control–sometimes good, sometimes bad. This month you are to pick one of these events and write about it. However, you must transplant that event into a fictional world (fantasy or science fiction). The details will obviously change, but the basic event should stay the same. Use first or third person POV with you as the primary character. Let us know not only what happened, but how it affected your life. Since it's fantasy, feel free to be more metaphoric than literal. Keep the challenge to 500 words or less.

He Who Laughs Last

By J. B. Rozen

A dark horn pressed to cracked, pursed lips; resonant blasts issued from its mouth, echoing across the Slaughterfield. The length of the eastern rise was lined by the thousands-strong army of the Miikan and as the horn blared its call to arms, the soldiers beat the flats of their battered weapons against shabbily armored breasts. The Miikan had known only war as far back as their memories served them. The border between Miika and Doulchant was ever in dispute and today, they meant to settle the matter for good.

On the western slope of the Slaughterfield were the Doulchaine, barbarians, all of them. Their bare chests were painted for war to match their savage faces all covered in thick beards and twisted braids. Young boys stood rearward, pounding enormous animal hide drums which stood on their sides. Drumfire boomed in a low, singular voice as their leader shouted, "We take no prisoners today." The soldiers roared approval. "Today we take back what is ours and we march home victorious." The soldiers raised their weapons to the sky and cheered, screamed.

On the eastern rise, the Miikan King, Amalsteen, drew his mount front and centre, the line went silent, the beating of weapons ceased and he addressed his people. "These barbarians, these heathens," he spat, waving his hand to the west, "this is what they want, a bloodletting. Well then, a bloodletting they shall have." Weapons beat heavily against worn armor, thumping like thunder over the roars of the Doulchaine horde.

"Slaughter them like animals, make them beg for their lives," King Amalsteen shouted. "To the charge!" he roared from the back of his black stallion. The warhorse reared up on its hind legs, snorting and braying its anticipation. As the stallion's front hooves touched soil, the first wave of the Miikan army surged forward, their calls rising to match the pounding hoof beats of the cavalry which now sped ahead of the foot soldiers. Five hundred horses charged down the embankment, two thousand hooves beating the earth, shaking it like angry gods.

Across the killing field a different voice cried out the same sentiment."For victory or for Death!" The chief of the Doulchaine, Hrung, foamed at the mouth, and his battle cry sent frenzy through the ranks. They wailed and howled madly until their faces reddened; tears of madness streaked their faces as they erupted onto the field, axes and maces drawn high above their shaggy heads. The Doulchaine were battle-raged and would not stop until exhausted or dead.

The Miikan riders were met savagely upon the western border of the Slaughterfield; their horses proved to be of little advantage over the mighty barbarians. Maces smashed equine skulls and muscled arms dragged riders hapless from their saddles. It was a massacre. The first wave of Miikan cavalry was obliterated while the Doulchaine suffered relatively few casualties. The barbarians relished in their victory, howling at the early morning sky. Hrung looked east to see King Amalsteen sitting atop his mount while he, chieftain of the Doulchaine, fought with his men. "Coward!"

Jubilation was short lived, though, as the timbre of hooves rose once again over the eastern rise: heavy cavalry. Black-armored horsemen stormed down amidst the wild men from the north like a brilliant sea of death. Crimson spray arced through the air behind sweeping blades like the tails of comets. Men roared in anger and screamed out in anguish. Many fell dead and disabled upon the Slaughterfield, but the Miikan were forced into retreat and once again the

Doulchaine were left celebrating. Again, King Amalsteen sat upon the ridge while his men were slaughtered below. “A King who doesn’t fight?” shouted Hrung. “How can a coward King order his men to war?” This elicited bouts of raucous laughter from his men.

The Miikan stood along the ridge for some time, the Doulchaine refusing to chase them and fight from a lesser position, though they likely could have taken the ridge. So, they waited. They watched as King Amalsteen paced across the files of men, pointing and speaking in lowered tones. Doulchaine laughter rung through the air as their Chieftain satirized the Miikan King as they ate by the campfire whilst night fell.

Early rays of sunlight illuminated the encamped Miikan high upon the ridge. It soon draped over the Doulchaine who slept in shifts by the western edge of the Slaughterfield. A low rumble like distant thunder roused the Doulchaine from their tents. Hrung, who had not slept that entire night, walked to the front of his encampment and shouted to Amalsteen, “Will you ever come down and fight like a man?”

There was no response save a building thrum as the legions of the Miikan began to thump their breasts. As they thumped, the rumbling grew louder and the earth shook. King Amalsteen turned his mount to face the Doulchaine and yelled down, “If you defeat my champion then perhaps we shall fight, though I seriously doubt that we shall ever meet on the field of battle.” With that he laughed, throwing his head back as his horse cantered backwards. The entire retinue of men parted, a wide berth opening across the ridge as a large bulge appeared above it. It grew larger, eyes soon peering out, each as large as a man.

Between the flanks of man the champion stared down across the Slaughterfield. Its form blocked out the sun as it stood, hunched and malformed before the army of the Doulchaine. The Behemoth, twenty feet tall with a club the size of a house and fists the size of cows.

“A good day to die,” thought Hrung, “good as any I suppose.”

Ice Runner

By A. M. Stickel

The Age of Man long passed, Beasts bearing little resemblance to their former stewards had inherited the world where I was returned to life from oblivion.

At the imperfect invocation of the human shaman "Spirit to dust, dust to flesh, flesh to mind, mind to spirit," the faint susurrus of my restored breath responded first. My dim awareness grew until I could smell and hear the old man and his unwashed followers surrounding me before I saw them.

Breathing deeply of the chill, stale air and blinking away the crusts from my eyes, I challenged, turning the full force of my glare upon them, "Who dares call forth Ice Runner?"

No answer came.

Opening my crossed arms from over my chest, I raised myself upright using my spears. Thrust into the stone floor, they popped in the cobweb-curtained chamber like breaking ice at the spring thaw. The dirty, fur-clad faithful fell prostrate before me.

"Stand, that I may know you as Men and not as Beasts." Their shaman translated. When the small golden-skinned folk arose, murmuring amongst themselves in what passed for language, I beckoned the shaman who knew my tongue to me. "What do you call yourselves?"

"We are the Ikthune – in your tongue The People." He stared up at me through rheumy, cataract-dimmed eyes. "I am Rock."

"You are no people of mine. Being undead, I am not one of you, Rock. Let me return to my warrior's reward, and lie in peace at last."

"You cannot, Lord Ice Runner, for you are our only hope. On the morrow the beasts will claim us for their larder." I saw that the shaman clutched the throbbing Red Jewel of Life to his heart. It would be so easy to relieve him of the ancient talisman with which he had roused me. Yet, I did not.

Seeing me shake my head in exasperation, hope bled from his eyes. I retorted, "Just as I met my end, so must your people meet their own."

"Can you not hear your sword, K'nar's song, across the ice? Only your legs are long and strong enough to leap the floes, or we would have retrieved her ourselves to make our end a noble one. With our deaths, all humanity dies. The Beasts need no weapons, save teeth and claws."

"I thought K'nar lost to the ice at my death. Let her sleep. I will carry you, a few at a time, across the floes, for you are small. You will be safe on the other side."

"We will never be safe from Beasts. No doubt worse ones await us beyond the floes." Rock motioned for his followers to leave; I noted many deformities among them as they shuffled into the tunnel beyond the crypt, their eyes downcast, shoulders slumped. A small child began to cry. Or else I finally heard K'nar. Groaning with her, I shoved them aside, and raced out to the ice.

Leaping the floes despite the encumbrance of my gilded armor, I fled over the gray depths toward the opposite shore. I unsheathed K'nar from the cold, hard rock by shattering it with my spears. Turning, I met the Beast Horde hidden beneath frozen falls as they sprang out, howling. Somewhat taller than men, they were covered in shaggy fur as white as my own hair. Their eyes and talons were red, their stench a desecration of the crisp air.

K'nar sang high and low, severing limbs and heads; blood and brains and guts spattered

the pure snow with crimson, yellow and green. In life I would have bled from many gashes. My undead state prevented this, providing much confusion among their ranks. The few gobbets of my grey flesh their pointed teeth managed to procure were quickly spat from between their thick lips. Two survivors tried to retreat, but my spears impaled them as they ran. In death their grimaces were ghastly.

I paused to wash K'nar in the moon-dappled deeps. The stars peered down to watch me cross the floes again. At dawn, with the remnants of humanity hidden in tunnels beyond my crypt, I stood facing the blast of a newborn blizzard, ready to engage the Beasts once more.

The snarling, roaring troop emerged from the near-whiteout. They were a motley array of striped or spotted fur, in grey or black on dirty white. Some ran on all fours, some walked stooped, and others upright. Teeth and claws were barbed or hooked. Emaciated from their long trek, yellow eyes were sunken, fur patchy. All looked hungry enough to fight to the death. They paused at the sight of me, quieting, averting their gazes to indirect stares. Their snouts and muzzles probed the air, suspicious of my undead scent.

"Come here, my pets, and meet your master," I taunted, swinging K'nar with one hand while hefting a spear in the other. A few tried to slink away, cringing at the mere sound of my voice. Their brethren turned and nipped at the cowards, devouring some on the spot. It was not a pretty sight, but I laughed at them and leapt high in the air, driving my spear into the largest Beast when I came down. The more aggressive ones immediately fell upon the dead, allowing K'nar to begin her harvest with the fiercest.

Those who jumped upon my back encountered the diamond-hard, razor-sharp bristles covering my armor. I kicked away the shredded remains, and enjoyed the resulting feeding frenzy. In the end, the Beasts devoured one another, and K'nar devoured the feasters. The blizzard covered the carnage.

The Ikthune emerged from their shelter with Rock at their head. He held the sacred talisman up to the sky. A faint ray of sunlight wounded me, and I watched my benumbed right arm drop K'nar. "Sleep again, Ice Runner" were the last words I heard whispered in my ear. And I did, until you called me back to tell my tale, be you Man or Beast, or part of both…

The Temple of Saint Alquin

By Edwin C. Mason

"A ladder down into the dark," the old man said. He patted a brass D set into the shaft wall. "Four hundred feet it runs, and at the bottom a tunnel leads from the mountain. Turn right when you reach the bottom; left will take you into the sepulcher."

Dorio nodded that he understood.

The old man counted down the rungs. "One, two, three, four. The fourth rung closes the shaft. The altar closes quickly, two heartbeats or three, and a man in the way will block it. Once closed *they* will be unable to open it, try as they might. Never has evil entered this tunnel, never has evil found the tomb of Saint Alquin. See that he remains undisturbed." He swung his feet onto the rungs and said, "Hurry. They are near."

"Thank you," Dorio said.

"No, thank you." The old man was gone then, scurrying down the shaft with bewildering speed.

Dorio turned from the shaft beneath the altar, ran down the dais, down the steps, through the doorway into the outer courtyard. Lowering an old jug, on a rope, he began to fill his waterskin.

It was three-fourths full when the first head appeared over the wall. While three Hrekists topped the wall and dropped into the courtyard, Dorio dropped the jug and jammed the cork home.

Black-clad, horror symbols stitched on their breasts in scarlet, the Hrekists spread slowly to the sides.

The rest would be seconds behind, Dorio knew. Swinging the skin across his back, he drew his sword, scooped up his buckler, and ran.

He ran from the well to the inner court over the long-ruined door and stumbled when he saw them: four Hrekists between him and the temple. Between him and the altar, between him and the tomb twelve generations inviolate at the bottom of the shaft. He didn't stop, but angled left behind a ruined structure. An arrow splintered on the stone wall before him, pelting his face with slivers. Turning right toward the temple, he ran for the gap in the long side, but saw men sprinting to intercept, and knew he could never reach it.

If not around them, then through them.

His turn toward the temple steps surprised them, and Dorio slipped past the first, caught the second with a buckler-thrust between bloodshot eyes, swung hard at a third and was through.

Hands caught at his ankles, hauling him down, sending him headlong, stairs smacking into leg, hip, chest, mouth. Spitting blood, Dorio looked up, saw his sword inches from his hand and lunged. He didn't gain a finger's breadth against he strong arms that gripped his legs. Swinging the buckler, once, twice, again, again, Dorio felt the arms grow slack. He pushed up, fingers curling around his sword hilt, rolling as a mace shattered steps behind him.

All around him now, the Hrekists swung and thrust, weapons ringing off the stone paving as Dorio, writhing, twisting, slipped blow after blow. Swinging leg-high, he sliced a calf, cracked a shin, thrust deep into a hip. The last fell across him, bleeding, howling, catching a mace blow

meant for Dorio.

Dorio shoved him away and rolled up to his knees, ducking another swing of the mace, thrusting up under the ribs, rolling back on his haunches, away from a falchion and back up onto his feet.

Momentarily one-on-one, Dorio stepped forward and right, pivoting on the hips and snapping a quick short-edge slice at the falchion hand, then, pivoting back on the hips, gave a high, hard, backhand cut, sending the dead Hrekist tumbling down the steps.

A dozen more pushed through into the inner court. Dorio turned, vaulted a corpse, ran through the gates into the temple and stopped.

Three Hrekists clustered around the altar, two more gaped at him.

No choice this time. Dorio charged, sliding past one, over another, almost to the shaft before they reacted.

But one did react, catching him in the right thigh with a savage blow.

Dorio pushed through, slamming his buckler across the last man's eyes, stepped forward.

The pain pushed in from the side, twisting, feeling like a corkscrew driven into the bone with a maul, the merciless bludgeoning of the stone floor surprisingly like a caress beside it.

Dorio rolled onto his back and threw his buckler, sending another Hrekist spinning, clutching a knee. Looking down, Dorio jerked a dagger from his thigh.

He rolled from another blow, rolled back, swung, feeling his sword bite deep, then rolled again, lunged into the shaft. Left hand clutching the top rung, he swung his legs over and in, kicking for the fourth rung, missing.

At the top of the shaft, inches from Dorio's hand, another Hrekist appeared, his smile showing broken and rotted teeth.

Feet dangling over a four-hundred-foot drop, Dorio kicked for the rung again, missed again.

The Hrekist looked down at him. "You don't need this hand, do you?" He reached a knife under Dorio's wrist. "How far to the bottom? Tell me when you know."

Kicking again, Dorio caught the rung, felt it pivot an inch, then hold. The altar began scraping closed.

Three heartbeats or less.

Pushing up a foot higher, Dorio swung hard. Too late the Hrekist saw the sword, eyes wide in the instant the blow landed.

"Four hundred feet," he said to the new-made corpse. Leaving his sword in the body, he dragged the Hrekist in and dropped him down the shaft, then followed on as fast as battered and wounded limbs would carry him. He looked up in time to see a spear shaft snapped off by the sliding altar.

The Treasure in Haunted Cavern

By Victoria Randall

Gephert halted before the cavern, breathing hard from his climb. The old man sitting there cast a rheumy eye at him, taking in his commoner's clothes and his worn scabbard, and sneered. "You won't last an hour."

"Are the guardians so ferocious, then?"

"Ferocious!" leered the old man. "Formidable, unconquerable—choose your word. Do you think you are the first? Once you get inside, you will see the bones of all those that have gone before you. If you have any sense in that pumpkin head of yours you'll take yourself back down the mountain while you've still breath in your body."

The young man gazed at the entrance. "They say they guard a great treasure. I need to win it for my father. He is very ill and needs medicines."

The old man shrugged and spat. "Don't just stand there gawking, then."

"Do you have any advice for me?"

"Aside from go home?" The old man considered. "Only this: it's a wise man who knows his own enemies."

"I thank you. By your leave." Gephert drew his sword and stepped into the cavern.

He felt as if he had entered another world. Darkness surrounded him. He heard a distant echo, the plash of falling water. There was no other sound.

He trod on something hard, and grimaced. He tried to walk silently, but the bones clattered as he brushed them. He could see nothing, so relied on hearing alone.

A soft swish to his right. He ducked and whirled. His sword struck metal. He fought by imagination, stepping back and guessing where the next blow might land. A sword flickered in the darkness, and he made out a faint hazy shape.

He took the next blow on his sword, feinted and struck armor. It felt solid enough, but all sound was deadened. Teeth gleamed in amusement in a misty skull. Another attacker loomed out of the gloom. He whirled to fend him off. Both their swords gleamed faintly in the dark.

A third attacker appeared on his right. He felt a pang of fear, wondering how many there were. He could not fight off an army by himself.

But he had no time for fear. Blow after blow he struck, warding , twisting, ducking, evading, lunging. They drove him back with inexorable strength, back into the dark behind him.

He winced as a sword point drew blood. He wondered if the creatures he fought could bleed. He had seen no sign of it.

A sword clashed on his. He lunged and felt his weapon bite into bone. He saw no wound, but the creature drew back as if dazed. Hope renewed, he attacked more fiercely. He attempted to drive them back as they had driven him. It was impossible: they had the advantage of him in numbers, strength, and familiarity with the place.

Did he have any advantage, he thought as he fought. None that he could think of, save desperation. He needed that treasure, it was his father's only chance.

They rained blows at him, driving him back. He was beyond the scattered bones now, rough stone under his feet.

On the forehead of the tallest glimmered a crown, faint as the memory of royalty.

"Why do you fight?" he asked, breaking the silence at last. "You have no need of treasure."

"We are condemned to guard the treasure," came the crowned one's voice, a rasping hiss. "We hate the living—you shall not have it."

"I have done you no harm!"

"You have all that we lack: you can feel sun and rain, taste bread, stride on the earth. We have lost all that, and will take it from you if we can."

"If we can"—was there a hint of defeatism in that phrase?

"And if you can't?" Gephert asked.

"Then it will be a very great surprise, for you will be the first to fail to die."

Gephert lunged suddenly, struck the creature to the heart. He reeled, but did not fall. Gephert's heart sank in despair; how could he defeat deathless creatures?

"Cease struggling," advised the other, " and it will go easier. Either way your head will roll soon enough."

"Don't be so sure," panted Gephert. He drove the fight to the attackers, and step by step took back the ground he had lost.

Abruptly the creatures fell back, and a pale greenish light grew before him. A shape grew in the light, a human shape. He halted, squinting at what stood before him. It looked familiar—could it be—his father?

Old Ralph himself, eyes glinting warmly, strode forward, hand outstretched. "Son!" he said in the voice Gephert knew as well as his own. "I've worried about you. Put up that sword and come outside with me. You've routed them at last."

Gephert stood hesitating. How could his father have come here? He had been so weak he could scarcely sit up.

What had the old man said? A wise man knows his own enemy.

But it was him, there was no doubt—then as he stood hesitating he saw his father jerk up his head with a movement of impatience, and arrogance—

He lifted the sword and drove it straight through the man's body. His father gasped, stumbled back, and dissolved into mist.

Gephert whirled angrily, sword at the ready. "Have you any more for me?" he shouted.

There was no answer. Only a light grew at the rear of the cavern, a shining white light. He drew closer and saw a chamber hewn from the rock, and a young maiden sitting there: little more than a child, and entrancingly beautiful.

She smiled at him, reached out and touched him, and all his wounds were healed.

He stared at her. "Are you the treasure?" he asked.

She took his hand. "I am," she said. "Come, let us go to your father."

They left the chamber and went out into the sunlight.

Infestation

By Ian Creasey

"What do you want me to kill?" I asked, putting down my cup.

Normally I skirt around the issue for a while, making the client show their coin by getting me more drinks. But I found the sludgy brown liquid unpleasantly bitter. I'd suggested meeting in the Chocolate House because I'd wondered what the exotic import was like, but now I wished we'd met in a tavern instead.

Cassia spooned white sugar into her own drink. "Dragons," she replied.

"More than one?"

"Hundreds," she said, her mouth set in a thin, grim line as far from joking as the mountains from the sea.

I'm familiar with the tale-telling that exaggerates one dragon into ten, and a twenty-foot wingspan into a sky-darkening behemoth. But *hundreds* was a new one.

"How big are they?" I asked.

"A few inches."

Maybe I was rustier in the local dialect than I thought. I indicated the width of the sugar-spoon. "Those kind of inches?"

"I'll show you."

She reached into her leather bag and brought out a thick glass jar. Inside, a reptilian shape crouched on the bottom. It was green with an iridescent shimmer on the wings. The tiny tail lashed back and forth. I tapped the side of the glass, and the creature bared impressive teeth.

She reached into her leather bag and brought out a thick glass jar. Inside, a reptilian shape crouched on the bottom. It was green, with an iridescent shimmer on the wings. The tiny tail lashed back and forth.

"I'm glad you brought a specimen," I said. "It's the most useful evidence anyone's ever shown me. Usually I get giant turds from crotchety town elders."

Cassia raised her eyebrows.

"Monster scats," I explained. "With monster ramblings. I hate dealing with village councils. They always have contradictory accounts of what's happening and how they dealt with it before. Then they start bickering over whether it was a shambler or a were-fox that got into the chicken-sheds last time."

"I'm on the village council," she said.

Me and my big mouth—I should use it for a monster-trap, not for keeping my feet in. But Cassia didn't look like an elder. Her dark hair was merely flecked with grey, and she had the air of someone more accustomed to doing things herself than ordering them done.

She went on, "Even the oldest and most crotchety of us have never seen anything like this before."

Neither had I. The beast looked like a dragon, but it was far too small. "How do you know this isn't just a funny-looking lizard?" I asked.

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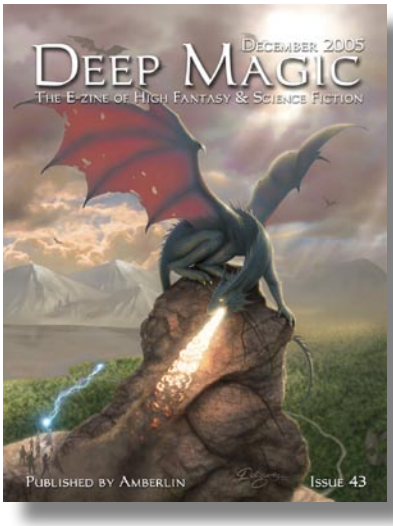
Featured Artist
Nick G. Deligaris



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Personal Quote: "The small details make a big difference."
Favorite Book or Author: The Lord of the Rings
Schools Attended: Graphic Design (in the Technological Educatinal Institute of Athens, Greece)
Started Painting In: Around 1985, I guess.
Artist Most Inspired By: Louis Royo, Keith Parkinson
Media You Work In: Photoshop, 3ds MAX (using a PC and a Wacom Intuos tablet).
Educational/Training Background: After finishing high school, I studied graphic design for 4 years (which also includes art & color theory, academic/artistic sketch, painting, semantics, history of art, basics of industrial design, photography and others).
Schools Attended: I attended academic sketch lessons for 1 year, plus 4 years in the graphic design school. I also won two scholarship awards during my studies in graphic design.
Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed: My work is displayed on my website (http://www.deligaris.com), in DeviantART (http://deligaris.deviantart.com), and some of it has been featured on other sites, too. One of my works is featured and published in the nVIDIA/Daz3D Calendar 2005 (in the February month).
Where Someone Can Buy Your Art or Contact You Professionally: People can buy my prints through my DeviantART account, or contact me at nick@deligaris.com.
Website URL: www.deligaris.com

Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: I guess I was born an artist. I have realized this inclination toward art since the first steps in my life. I was spending much of my free time drawing, when I was still at a very young age. I was always

continued on next page

fascinated with creating things from my imagination.

Q: How would you describe your work?
A: My work mainly consists of fantasy or sci-fi themes and sometimes other subjects, as well. I would describe it as a realistic and sharp-detailed illustration, yet with a soft and "dreamy" look and feeling. I also like the use of contradiction in my subjects.

Q: Where do you find your inspiration?
A: I find my inspiration from other artists, from movies, music, books or comics, as well as from nature and my surroundings in general.

Q: What inspired this piece? (Tell us its story...)
A: I always wanted to make a classic fantasy scene, as it would be fit for a book or CD cover, for example. I'm obsessed with dragons, and I had made similar scenes many times in the past, but they were poorly depicted since I was still pretty young. And, actually, this subject is very simple and childish in the aspect of concept. That's the reason it's a "classic," too. I've also seen many other similar illustrations from other artists that I liked, but in all of them, there was at least one element I didn't like so much. So I decided to make my own composition, to make a painting that fits my own taste, and create something that looks spectacular and majestic. And that's how "Reign Supreme" was born.

Q: What do you consider your influences?
A: My influences come mainly from fantasy artists, like L. Royo, K. Parkinson, and many others. However, I don't try to mimic anyone's style. I use these influences to create my own.

Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?
A: I guess the recognition and respect from the artistic community and the general audience is the most important thing for me.

Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre?
A: The Fantasy and Sci-Fi genre was a kind of subculture in the previous years, an undercurrent, but during the latest period it started to "expand," beginning from the early comics and a small number of RPG's and conquered the computer game and film industry. Now we see that the fantasy/sci-fi movies are much more popular than ever before, and the same applies to the computer games, in which this genre is predominant without any question. Undoubtedly, the revolution in computer graphics and technology in general was a significant factor to encourage the producers going toward that direction, helping them to bring to life imaginary worlds. And because technology is still getting improved, I believe that this genre will become even more famous in the immediate future.

The Lost Hemingway

By Mark Reeder

Willie Beeman fiddled with the cable jacked into the mastoid area below his left earlobe. Moments later the silver-wired spider in his brain sent waves of horizontal lines floating through his frontal lobes, bruising his optic nerves. A tintinnabulum followed and his head filled with storms of static fractured by splinters of light. Shapeless forms floated out of the storm-speckled maelstrom like taunting ghosts. The specters flared and died among striated clouds only to reappear, Phoenix-like, on the edges of his mind.

Phantoms of illusion or reality? Willie could not tell. The storms battering his mind, however, were real and he winced at the pain.

He adjusted the cable a second time. His head felt ready to implode and he was about to disconnect when the buzzing interference dissipated. The ghost-filled clouds disappeared. His body tingled with a rush of light through the synapses of his brain, and his mind expanded like Little Boy at Hiroshima as a new world came to life inside his skull.

I, Wil Drake, Private Eye, his HoloNet alter ego, was virtually alive and moving through the worlds of Cyberspace as only an alter ego can.

Willie's brain merged with a part of Cyberspace called the Gamelan as he jacked directly into the Private Investigator's HoloNet. He was no longer Willie Beeman, a waiter working at the Skyview Lounge on the NASA Clan's Space Station L-1.

He was . . .

. . . I mean, I, Wil Drake, Private Eye, his HoloNet alter ego, was virtually alive and moving through the worlds of Cyberspace as only an alter ego can.

-1-

Rain splashed diamonds on the windshield of my Jag but the bead-X glass let it dribble harmlessly away. I looked around. A lone surfer on the strip, I had been driving for fifteen minutes, and all I had to show for it was a low fuel cell and lint in my pocket. Somewhere in the dim night ahead, a curvy blonde named Marcia waited for me with a package for my client. I turned left into the parking lot of the Microsoft Clan's New York, Beau Monde Galleria. At the entrance I passed a pair of Grafs tagging their latest El Greco—a giant cockroach, ala William Burroughs—peering through Microsoft's corporate logo. I turned right onto a winding driveway that wove through a bonsai garden, past Lilliputian gardeners laboring like weevils trimming the diminutive trees, and finally pulled up in front of the Westin Hotel.

A valet took my coupe. He blew off the tip when he recognized me, mumbling thanks for the score on the lotto. He had won, along with a thousand others who had used the 'Nets to generate the winning 15 number combination from a program I'd boosted off the NASA Clan's orbiting relay station, ComSat-3.

"It's on the house, Mr. Drake."

He roared off and was in fourth gear before he skidded in a four-wheel drift into the

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World Building

By Mark Reeder

Last spring, I had the wonderful opportunity to meet the trio behind Deep Magic. Jeremy, Jeff and Brendon were in my neck of the woods, attending a Scifi/Fantasy Con known as Opus. Held at a swank hotel, the Denver Sheridan, it was a bustling, hustling convention. I had to duck between the hub and the bub generated by colorfully costumed characters—warlocks, witches and wizards, scantily clad faeries, white-armored Star Troopers and Jedi Knights in non-descript, gray robes—to find my way through the maze of booths, offering a myriad of fantastical ornaments and garfus, including dream catchers, Celtic pendants and earrings, and wizard card games, as well as books by aspiring genre authors.

Deep Magic had a booth at the entrance where items for sale, a Macintosh (with a Deep Magic issue powered up) and advertising were laid out to catch the eye of Opus attendees and the occasional hotel guest wandering through. I came down on Saturday to help man the booth with another Deep Magic staffer, Nikki (Karlitea on the forums), while Jeremy, Jeff and Brendon occasionally attended hour-long workshops, as well as giving a few, on 'the bones' of writing. As we Deep Magic staff shuffled in and out, we got to talking about said bones. One thing led to another and the next thing I knew, I was being encouraged to write down my thoughts about how a story comes together—specifically world building.

You see, or you probably don't because you aren't inside what passes for my mind, I don't like the word 'setting.' It doesn't really capture what goes into building a world for a good novel, novella or short piece of scifi and fantasy. I figure when I'm telling a story, I'm not laying out a setting for where the action takes place. Instead, I'm building a world in which the characters will live . . . die . . . love . . . hate . . . whimper . . . be scared . . . do heroic deeds and great evils . . . and talk to one another.

World building is where plot, dialogue and characters come together. The metaphor I use to describe this process is landscape painting. Actually, I came up with this idea while watching a PBS show called Painting with Bob Ross. Ross was an eccentric artist who taught painting at a whirlwind pace. An entire landscape—signed and ready for the wall—would come together within the 25 minutes allotted for his show. At any rate, at one point while watching his show on a lazy afternoon with a pouring rain outside, I realized that world building is a lot like landscape painting. The artist starts with the background—mountains, sea, meadow, snowy wastes, desert or whatever serves as a backdrop. Then he paints in the action of the foreground. A good artist makes the foreground spring off the canvas from a visually provocative background.

Writing is the same. An author builds a world using words to create a picture in readers' minds. World building is his or her landscape where stories spring alive.

Stretching the metaphor a bit farther, like a landscape painting, a story without good world building means nothing if the storyline has no context. If an author hasn't referenced what world he or she is building, from a space ship hurtling along the geodesic lines of null space to a planet of fantastical, rocky outcroppings and shadowy, silver-misted woods, then characters stand around . . . scenes die without development . . . dialogue hangs like a bad joke at a funeral. World building makes characters come alive, dialogue leap off the page, storylines grip readers by the throat and shake them until they gasp at the sheer reality of what is happening. Imagine Dune without the desert of Arrakis; the dragons of Pern without the Red Star.

Seems obvious, doesn't it? Even so, as an editor, I read a lot of stories where it seems as if the writer has launched the story's cast of characters in a lifeboat hoping they can make their way through the plot to the other end without any significant guideposts to show them the way. The result is that the stories aren't compelling. The characters are ho-hum and the dialogue is stilted, since there's no world as a backdrop for the storyline. There is nothing that makes the story convincing, nothing that helps me empathize with the characters, because I don't have enough information to visualize where the action is taking place.

So my advice is for authors to build their world and make them real to the readers. Most of this information will come in pieces as the storyline unfolds. Castles, forests, interstellar gas sheets, weather, earth, sky (the list is as endless as the imaginations of the author) crop up in scenes, showing readers just what a perilous place the characters have found themselves stranded in.

"Paul stared around them, saw the rock scarp lifting out of the desert like a beach rising from the sea, wind carved palisades beyond." This example from Dune shows readers a bleak, friendless world.

So that's my insight into writing scifi and fantasy—build your world like a landscape artist. Create your background so that, in every scene, a bit of the world breaks through, reminding the reader of what a fantastical realm this place is where the story and characters live.

Steven Kenny

Titles: Embrace (left)
Heir (bottom left)
Towers of Babel (bottom right)

Website: http://www.stevenkenny.com/

Steven Kenny attended the Rhode Island School of Design, spending one year studying in Rome. He now exhibits internationally and is represented by galleries in Santa Fe and Atlanta. His studio in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia is surrounded by the wonders of nature—an endless source of inspiration.

Mark of a Saint

By Amy R. Butler

The young woman knelt at the crossroads, her small mouth moving quickly in half-spoken words. Her lips stopped suddenly, apart as if in mid-word or a gasp, then she kissed the medallion in her hands, its coolness sending a shiver down her spine. She slipped the chain around her neck. She paused before rising, her lowered, diverted eyes the only indication she was adding a small supplication of her own.

"Holiness, we must hurry to the town before sunset."

"Peace, Lis." Fianche's voice hardened, her gaze still far away. To herself she murmured, "I hold no fear of the dark now."

Lis's eyes widened, her mouth shrank, and Fianche could feel Lis's religious embarrassment and terror for her.

"Help me up," Fianche said, holding out her hand.

Lis took her arm and helped her to her feet. The two young women paused, looking at each other, and Lis let fall the words they were both on the edge of.

"You're pregnant, holiness."

Fianche dragged her staff back, making a line in the dirt, almost afraid Lis had touched it, manhandled it in the past few days. But no. Lis knew better. Instead, she smiled wearily. "You know me well. Too well, darling *ignate*."

"I know you would never do such a thing," Lis said lowly.

"The Order will not allow it," Lis said as they passed underneath the arch. "No matter what the reason or cause, a sainthood will never be bestowed upon a mother."

Fianche took Lis's arm, leaned on it as they walked the last stretch of road to the village. Her feet ached from traveling. "Men are deceitful," she whispered, "greedy and selfish. Even in the smallest villages, even in the countryside, men are not innocent."

Lis looked terrified, unwilling to listen anymore. Fianche fell silent in confidence that she had said enough.

The village's wooden gate was open, a dirty and stained uniform sleeping on his stool outside. A small boy was running along the perimeter of the wall, calling the coming sunset.

"The Order will not allow it," Lis said as they passed underneath the arch. "No matter what the reason or cause, a sainthood will never be bestowed upon a mother."

"Nothing is certain until it is born. I will be provided for." As they shuffled slowly toward the town center, Fianche noted the many stares of the townspeople. She reminded herself they were focused on her drab, ugly clothes and her contrasting bright, rich hood, not what was hiding underneath them.

They entered the small square, little more than a paved walkway between dark shops. Lis guided Fianche to a small fountain.

"Sit for a minute," she suggested. "Catch your breath."

"You act as if I lumber already," Fianche joked but sat nonetheless.

Lis did not leave yet. "Holiness, how did you… know?"

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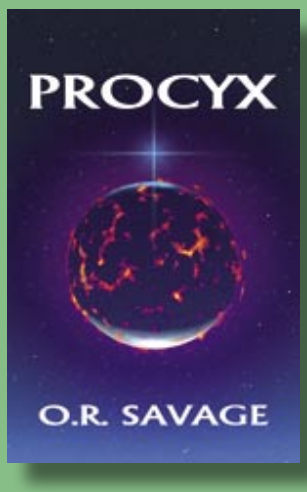

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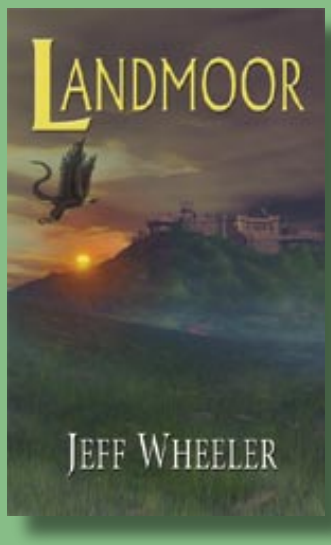

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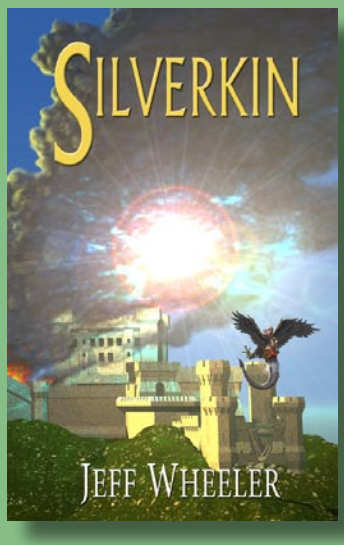

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Deep Magic Book Reviews website

Editor's Choice: Science Fiction

Courtesan Prince
By Lynda Williams

The futuristic cultural clash in Lynda Williams' latest work predates that of her first OKAL REL Series work: *THRONE PRICE*. Her evolved Earth pioneers from a 22nd century alpha technocracy include one Ann of Rire, a fiery, reality-skimming, space pilot heroine. She becomes intimately involved with the hero, Von, enlightened descendant of the genetically-enhanced beta wave of Terran spacers, or Gelacks. These races, believing Earth lost to them forever, have warred over extraterrestrial territories, and finally resorted to avoiding contact. *COURTESAN PRINCE* relates the reestablishment of contact between Rire's Reetions and the Sevolites of the Gelack Empire.

Anthropologist Ranar of Rire, who becomes the emissary of the Reetions, encounters deadly opposition on Gelion in the heart of the Sevolite Empire. But he finds support in the unlikely warrior ally, Di Mon, who believes in honor over victory. Their interaction provokes political upheaval.

Swords and high-tech weapons cross as tempers flare, and abominable, even unthinkable, crimes occur. At their center, the sword-dancing teen, Von, is sought at first for his grace and talent and then for his strategic position as the pawn of empire-builders. He discovers his ability to pilot his way through not only the challenging spaceways of two races but also the minefields of diplomacy. Von's mind and heart are under attack throughout the tale. In the end, he must surrender to his destiny as Lord Amel, whom his people thought lost in infancy. The more sophisticated nineteen-year-old Ann proves to be the key to his survival and ultimate triumph. Ann's more self-centered passion flowers into one both beneficial and sacrificial.

Before embarking on Williams' 453-page stellar voyage, prepare with the prologue. She presents an invaluable guide to her OKAL REL universe therein. These few pages define important basics to which readers may refer throughout the story, especially if they have not first read *THRONE PRICE*. A certain amount of maturity is also required of the reader in order to fully appreciate the subtle messages embedded in the text. While the print is large and easy on the eyes, the concepts of future societal taboos and repression on one hand, balanced by the lack of privacy and overt expression on the other, will surprise liberals and scandalize conservatives.

Feudal Gelion nobility does not value its vast underclass, of which Von is considered a member before his true bloodlines are revealed. Sevolites with the highest concentration of genetic purity feel free to exploit those with less and settle their conflicts at swordpoint. In contrast, Reetions consider every act of their computer-governed, egalitarian citizenry a matter of public record and have all but abandoned the concept of privacy. They are micromanagers. As a result, the first members of both societies to meet are the rebels from both, creating a perilous and unstable frontier.

Williams craftily exposes the sleazy, dark side of her universe, giving her readers villains and corrupt officials, the downfalls of whom they can anticipate with self-righteous relish. This is particularly true of the seedy duo responsible for Von's suffering. The added assassination scene at the novel's end is the icing on the cake and signifies a hope of justice for Gelion's commoners in the long run, with Amel as their champion. He is noble, not so much by birthright and bloodlines, but by overcoming insurmountable odds.

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Aside from Ann and Amel, Ranar and Di Mon, the minor players are quite engaging. While their roles may not appear as momentous as those of the major characters, without them the story would lose its rich variety. Except for Amel, who has few flaws, all of the characters are an equal admixture of strengths and weaknesses, ranging from the pitiful to the perverted.

The technology of the two races is just as absorbing, especially when Ann and Von are trying to understand each other's, which makes for a variety of comic, harrowing, and poignant scenes. The fighting is often in life-and-death situations and never gratuitous. The use of medical technology is always appropriate and vivid. Dialogue is straightforward and easy to follow and the pace brisk. Copy flaws are few and do not interrupt the reader's attention unduly. Content and cover art are overtly adult without being offensive to the more open-minded reader. All in all, Williams has done an outstanding job.

Possible Objectionable Material: Sexuality, violence and controversial topics are present.

(Reviewed by A.M. Stickel)

Book Review: Science Fiction
Speaker for the Dead
By Orson Scott Card

Three thousand years ago, humanity encountered the first sentient alien race besides itself: The Buggers. A fierce war was fought against them that ended in the utter destruction of the Buggers. The man who led the final battle against them, Ender the Xenocide, is now reviled as the most evil man in history, although at the time he was a hero.

However, two thousand years after the establishment of the Starways Congress in 3,000 A.D., Ender is still alive. After the Bugger war, he discovered the truth about the Buggers and wrote a famous book explaining them to all of mankind. He became the first Speaker for the Dead, a man who seeks to learn the truth about people's lives and then speak it to others. Ender has spent most of his life traveling between planets at relativistic speeds, speaking the deaths of people across the galaxy, so while thousands of years have passed for the majority of humans, he is still in his mid-thirties. He now goes by his given name, Andrew Wiggin, and none but his sister, Valentine, know that the great Speaker for the Dead and Ender the Xenocide are one and the same.

Now, on the Catholic colony planet of Lusitania, a new species of sentient aliens has been discovered–the Piggies, a species of diminutive mammals that inhabits the forests of the planet. The human settlement has been closed off from them, and only two xenologers are allowed outside the compound to study the Piggies without corrupting their primitive culture. Mysteries abound surrounding the Piggies, and two xenologers are gruesomely murdered by them for unknown reasons. Once again, it seems as if humanity's differences with alien species will prove irreconcilable.

Ender comes to Lusitania to speak the deaths of the xenologers, but he also comes to understand the Piggies and help them to be at peace with humans, thus atoning for his great sin in destroying the Buggers. Ender also carries the egg of the last Bugger hive queen, and he hopes that Lusitania will provide her with a home where the Buggers can rise again to live in harmony with humans and Piggies. In the process, he helps the settlers of Lusitania to come to terms with the tragedies that haunt them.

Speaker for the Dead is a sequel to Ender's Game, but it stands alone quite well. It's a masterful novel of the pains of the living, the sorrow for the dead, and the constant struggle to live in peace with others, even when it seems impossible. This is a book full of wisdom, and Card obviously has a deep knowledge of humanity. Ender is a character who can see into the depths of a person's soul and know how to heal their wounds.

In fact, characterization is one of Card's strengths. Among the novel's central characters are a family of six children, ranging vastly in age, who are each fully realized, distinct characters with their own problems, aspirations, and manners of speaking, from eight-year old Grego, a hellion who often carries a knife taped to his leg, to the oldest, Miro, one of the current xenologers of Lusitania.

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Speaker for the Dead is also excellent science fiction, in which cool science is at the service of a great story, rather than having the story be the servant of cool science. Relativity is important, not for the sake of exploring the scientific idea, but for its effects on Ender and the people he's dealt with over the centuries. The Piggies are also among the most fascinating aliens I've yet read about.

Possible Objectionable Content: A couple gruesome murders, many mild sexual references, and ideas that may be disturbing to some

(Reviewed by Sean T. M. Stiennon)

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Cassia sent the house boy to buy a fresh locust from the vendor across the street. She broke off the locust's head, lifted the lid of the jar a fraction, then dropped in the scrap. The jar's inhabitant flamed like a phosphor-match and roasted it.

"Okay, it's a dragon," I said, watching it dislocate its jaw and swallow the meal whole, like a snake.

"They swarm and attack chickens, pigs, cattle—even people. And there's this."

She put a gold coin on the table. The dragon turned and bumped its nose on the glass. Wings flapping, it butted against the inside of the jar in a frenzy of avarice. The jar shook and jerked along the table, toward the gold.

I knew how the dragon felt. It had been a long time since I'd seen anything higher than a silver four-bit. I picked up the coin and put it in my pocket. The dragon sank to the bottom of the jar and folded its wings, but I sensed its bright pinpoint eyes watching me.

Cassia held out her hand.

"That's my consultation fee," I said.

"You value yourself highly. But what's your experience? Why should we hire you?"

I laughed. "That's exactly what I was wondering. Why can't you deal with these uppity lizards yourselves?"

"I'm a good archer, but I've seen too many to shoot one by one," she said. "And lots of people think these are just hatchlings. No-one's followed them back to their nest in case there's a mother dragon out there."

I shook my head. "Hatchlings can't fly. And they're bigger than this, even straight from the egg. No, these things are full grown—just small." I gazed at the dragon in the jar, wondering where it had come from.

"You have experience with dragons, Mr. Ormrod?" She spoke as if she expected me to produce souvenir fangs or references from grateful townsfolk.

"Not lately, but yes. There was the time —"

"Any recent jobs? Other monsters, if not dragons?"

I sighed and took another sip of the chocolate. It wasn't so bad with sugar, but some alcohol would have given it fire. "I haven't hunted lately because there's been nothing left to hunt." That wasn't the only reason I'd stopped, but it was the only one I mentioned. "The last incursion was that dragon at Wenlock, years ago. Anyone claiming recent kills is a liar."

She nodded. "I know—I've met a few. I wanted to make sure you weren't one of them."

"Enough about my credentials. What about yours? How much will you pay me?"

"That depends how much treasure there is," she said.

I smiled at this old ploy. "You want to pay me out of the dragons' treasure? There might not be any. I bet you haven't seen it."

"We've seen our gold disappear. They've ruined our trade because no one can show a glint of coin in the market."

I shook my head. "I never take jobs on that basis. If I did, I wouldn't need commissions—I'd get wind of a dragon, kill it, and carry off all the treasure without bothering to tell the locals. No, for a job like this I only accept payment in advance."

She glared at me like a basilisk's mother-in-law. "If we pay you in advance, how do we know you won't run back to Silloth and spend it on beer?"

"If you don't, how will I buy all the equipment I need? Do you expect me to strangle hundreds of dragons with my bare hands?"

Now it wasn't so different from dealing with pinchpenny village elders. The haggling was

routine. Eventually she agreed to pay me ten gold in advance, one silver for every dragon killed, and a tenth of the treasure. I let her beat me down on the last, because dragons' treasure is often oversold. Sometimes it's just baubles and pebbles.

And sometimes it isn't.

* * *

Three days later, I stood in Cassia's farmyard and gazed at the devastation. The haystack had become a mound of grey ash, turned sludgy by rain. The chicken-house was four blackened struts poking out of a heap of cinders and small bones. A skeleton lay in the pigpen, right by the fence where the pig had made a final, futile attempt to escape.

"I saw that," said Cassia. "I watched from the house while the dragons swarmed. The pig charged up and down, until they roasted its eyes. Then they settled on it and began to feed. The smell of burning flesh, the awful squealing, the panic of the few other animals we had left...." She paused a moment to recover her voice. "It didn't take long for them to pick the carcass clean. The dragons flopped in the mud, too bloated to fly. I quickly packed my things, thinking it would be the safest time to leave.

"But I didn't want to let them drive me out of my own house without a fight. So I picked up a preserve-jar and walked toward the pigpen, ready to rush back inside if the dragons stirred. They were so fat—stuffed with my pork, my chickens, my goats. I bent down and scooped one of them into the jar. Then I fled."

This was the first time she'd returned. I could see her jaw muscles tensing as she tried not to weep at the sight of her ravaged home.

"Capturing the specimen was very helpful," I said. "The rest is my job."

"Have you got everything you need?"

"Probably not." I hefted my pack. "But I've got all I can carry."

"Then good luck." She walked back to her horse, tied up by the road—it had balked at coming into the farmyard, spooked by the smell of death and ashes. I waved Cassia goodbye, then turned my attention to the glass jar she'd left behind.

I'd fed the captive dragon some meat dosed with a sleeping potion, and now it slumbered even when I tapped a coin on the glass. Wearing my new gear—long-sleeved gloves, thick leather cloak, and beekeepers' facemask—I opened the jar and tipped the beast onto the ground. It didn't stir. I grasped both wings and pulled until I felt them begin to tear.

That woke the dragon up. I leapt back as it spouted angry fire and rose into the air. With its crippled wings, it could only just fly. Exhausted, it sank to the earth and gave me a baleful glare. It sulked for a while, then scuttled along the ground. I broke into a jog and followed, hoping the wounded dragon would retreat to its nest.

Soon I lost the creature in some undergrowth, but I kept going until I saw enough others to know I'd entered their territory. They were an eerie sight. From a distance you could mistake them for birds, until the setting sun glinted on their scales, or a burst of flame roasted moths for dinner. I saw scorch marks on rocks and trees, and I wondered why the whole area hadn't gone up in smoke. Maybe it was the wet autumn we'd had—everything looked too soggy to burn. The dark of the year isn't my favourite time for country jaunts, but it's the best time to go hunting. Many creatures are more sluggish in winter. A couple of times I've claimed a hero's reward for stabbing monsters so deep in hibernation they didn't even notice me kill them.

I'd left the cleared farmland around the village. Now trees grew on the slopes between

crags and boggy ponds. Ahead, I heard the rumble of falling water, which made me glad that finding fresh water to drink wouldn't be a problem. I decided to kip down for the night and started looking out for a campsite.

The trees thinned into a clearing, bounded by a cliff with a waterfall feeding a large pool. All around, tiny dragons skimmed for insects. Clouds of them darted out of small openings in the cliff-face to swoop and hunt.

I saw all this in the few seconds before they noticed me. Then they swarmed on me and began flaming. Reflexively I put up my arm to protect my eyes. I felt the heat scorch my gloves, my cloak, my boots. The pig's pitiful skeleton flashed into my mind. I flailed my left arm at random, hitting a few of the creatures, but there were far too many for me to fend off.

I turned and ran. With my right arm still protecting my eyes, I couldn't see where I was going. After bouncing off several trees, I fell down and splashed. I was in the pool. The cold nearly stopped my heart. My leathers and heavy pack dragged me down into the water.

The pool wasn't very deep at the edge, or I would have drowned. I stood up, almost slipped in the ooze, and gasped for breath. The dragons swooped for another attack. I ducked back into the water and crawled in the mud until I ran out of air. When I resurfaced, fewer dragons attacked than before. I almost welcomed the flames on my wet shivering body.

By repeatedly taking to the water, and moving away from their nesting site in the cliff, I eventually lost the dragons. But I was icy cold and soaked through. A scythe of moon grudged enough light to distinguish tree from shadow at two paces. I blundered around until I found a sheltered hollow.

In my pack I had a firestone, payment from a job long ago. This enabled me to start a fire with the soggy twigs and leaves on the forest floor. When the flames caught hold, I stripped off and rubbed myself down, then put on my spare clothes. Soon I was warm enough to berate myself for walking straight into the hive.

Still, at least I'd found the dragons. Now I just had to figure out what to do about them.

* * *

The next day, my cautious reconnaissance established that this was the only nesting site. The dragons flew in and out of small holes in the cliff: one at the bottom, and two higher up. They carried dead mice and other scraps—food for hatchlings, tinier still—together with small stones and the occasional glint of coins or jewels. Dragons line their nests with anything that doesn't burn, especially if it lures treasure-seekers into their lairs and stomachs.

Presumably a cave lay within the cliff. I wondered how much treasure it contained. I also wondered if I could find another way inside, but careful searching failed to reveal one.

I thought about killing the dragons. With nets, birdlime, poisoned bait, and so forth, I could easily kill enough of them to earn a tall stack of silver bits. Then I'd tell the village council to tunnel into the cliff if they were so keen on the treasure.

The plan was unappealing—the kind of sensible advice I would give, but not take. It didn't get me any of the treasure, or solve the underlying mystery: *where did the dragons come from?* Everyone knows that dragons are big and scary—so say all the songs and scrolls and tales of heroes. I'd never heard of miniature dragons, and I felt sure they must have appeared for a reason. The more I watched the tiny dragons carrying treasure into the cliff, the more I became convinced that someone knew about them.

And so I decided to wait for him to show up.

* * *

When I tell tales of my old exploits, I concentrate on the tracking, the scares, the kill. I don't bore everyone with the days spent following false trails, getting lost and running away. Yet without them it all sounds too easy. I've been pestered by would-be apprentices who thought they could run into the bush with a spear and impale a monster in time to get home for supper. It doesn't work like that. The mystique hides a lot of hanging around, waiting for something to show up that might not turn up at all.

It's like this. You're alone in the woods, dirty, smelly and unshaven. You haven't seen anyone for days or weeks—you've long since lost count—and you're so desperate for company that you talk to your own reflection in the pool. You're permanently damp, cold and hungry. Your rations have long gone, and autumn's harvest of fruits and berries is a fond memory. The dragons have killed or scared away all the local squirrels, hedgehogs, and other game.

There is nothing to eat except dragons.

When you take a six-inch dragon and throw away the wings, tail and head, you're left with a scrap of meat that tastes of damn all and is gone in two bites. So you give up on the idea of saving the heads as proof for the bounty, and you boil them up with the wings and the tails into a soup that also tastes of damn-all, but makes you sick afterward.

That's the final straw. That's when you decide to give it up and head back. That's when you remember why you gave up hunting, and wonder how you squandered your money and had no choice but to go back to it.

That's when your quarry finally shows up.

It was a steel-cold day, the first hard frost of winter. A skin of ice covered the pool, and on the cliff long icicles bit into the waterfall like great shining teeth. The chill subdued the dragons: fewer of them ventured outside, and they moved sluggishly.

As the sun drowsed toward its western bed, I saw a winged shape in the sky—huge, and coming closer. My heart began racing. I feared the townsfolk had been right after all, and it was a full-size mother dragon. I retreated to the cover of some rocks, downwind of the cliff.

But as the beast approached, I saw that its tail was too stubby for a dragon, and the wings had no glint or iridescent shimmer. It was a griffin. And it had a rider on its back.

The griffin landed in the clearing and settled on its leonine haunch. A few dragons fluttered out to size up the arrival, and the rider brushed them away with a casual gesture. He wore a long black cloak with a baggy hood; I couldn't see his face. With a lithe movement he leapt to the ground, then walked to the cliff. He stood in front of the knee-high opening at the bottom. The dragons buzzed him angrily, but their flames had no effect on the cloak and he ignored them.

He disappeared.

I rubbed my eyes and took another look. The griffin was still there, but the man had definitely gone, even though the entrance hole was tiny. There must be a secret way inside.

It was time to be bold. I walked across the clearing, keeping well away from the griffin. The massive creature gave me a brief look but didn't stir. I drew my dagger and stood next to the spot where the rider had vanished. Even so close to the cliff, I couldn't see how he had entered.

Now the dragons turned to me. I fended them off as best I could, trying to keep quiet for fear of alerting the stranger. After long wear, my mask and leathers were a loose collection of

fragile tatters. One dragon found a hole in the hood and flamed my head, and I had to bite my tongue to stop myself screaming. The smell of burnt hair rose into the twilight.

A few painful minutes later, the black-cloaked man reappeared, carrying a sack. I shoved him to the ground and knelt on his chest, holding my dagger to his throat. The hood of his cloak fell back, revealing a mass of dark curly hair and a facemask similar to my own but in better repair. The faceless confrontation felt absurdly theatrical, and I wanted to rip off the mask to see whom I was dealing with, but the dragons kept swarming around us. I grasped his arm and dragged him away from the cliff, knowing the dragons would calm down when we left the entrance to their nest. I watched him closely to make sure he didn't try anything with the other arm, but he kept hold of the sack. I was very interested in the contents of that sack.

When I'd lugged him across the clearing I said, "So—"

That was as far as I got before everything started swelling, bulging, bloating to enormous size in a few nauseous instants. I lost my balance and fell over, astonished to find that the dead leaves on the ground were as big as myself.

No, I was as small as they. Somehow I had shrunk—I had *been* shrunk. The griffin-rider had magicked me.

I heard a thunderous rustling in the leaves. Realising he was standing up, I fled from the noise, terrified of being trodden on. I stumbled through a maze of obstacles—rocks, dragon droppings, brambles, ice shards.

"That was close," the magician muttered in a bass rumble. He towered into infinity, a monstrous figure whose cloak was darker than the darkness. I saw the huge head move, a sweeping shadow in the dregs of twilight.

Instinctively I froze. Like the meanest rodent, I prayed that if I didn't move, he wouldn't spot me in the gloom. He soon gave up, walking away with earth-shaking footsteps.

He was going to fly off and leave me like this, at the mercy of the dragons. I had become tiny, defenceless prey. They'd soon swarm down and roast me.

I ran after the magician. I didn't worry about him hearing me—he made far more noise than I. But his steps were so much longer that he soon outpaced me. He reached the griffin before I was halfway there. I saw him fiddle with the sack, securing it to the griffin's harness. I ran as fast as I could, scrambling over leaves and twigs and stones. The magician mounted the griffin and strapped himself into the saddle-seat. I was closer, closer. The griffin's wings began beating, almost flattening me with the down-draught of air.

I bumped into something tall and warm. It was the griffin's foot. I grabbed onto the thick ropy strands of its fur. Then the ground disappeared. We were airborne. I felt sick with panic, overwhelmed by the rushing wind and the rank smell of the beast. I clung on, hoping that the griffin hadn't felt my grip, hoping that the magician wouldn't discover me, and above all hoping that the journey would be short.

After a while I relaxed a little. I clambered up the griffin's leg and wedged myself into the harness. Thirsty, I sucked dewdrops that had frozen onto the leather. I began to enjoy the dreamlike exhilaration of flying and its new perspective on the world. The cold moon illuminated a vast grey landscape that looked like the cobwebbed, abandoned project of some bored god.

It must have been about midnight when we landed. The magician dismounted, stretched, and yawned. I disentangled myself from the harness and slid down the griffin's body. A servant came to take the griffin into a stable, and I followed.

Tired, cold and hungry, I knew that for now I could only hide and scavenge.

* * *

Again I will spare you a full account of the next few days: a lonely, marginal existence of scurrying for scraps and avoiding open spaces, always fearful of being noticed and captured, or not noticed and squashed. The worst of it was coping with the rats that infested the grounds. Their angry red eyes were level with my own, and their teeth were longer and sharper than my feeble dagger. I owned nothing else—my pack was back in the woods. I had no defence against the rats other than keeping out of their way.

Gradually I became familiar with my surroundings. From overhearing conversations, I learned that I'd arrived at the estate of a magician called Murre, who was very young to have achieved such wealth. Rumour said his fortune derived from the slaying of a dragon. Certainly he had an impressive treasury. I sneaked in once, and the sight will stay with me till I die: mountains of silver, rivers of gold, and glorious rainbows of jewels. It looked like enough money to buy immortality and have change left over for beauty and love. All the coins—the great cartwheels of gold and grindstones of silver—were too big and heavy for me to steal. The jewels, however....

I assumed that this treasure had been harvested from the miniature dragons, like honey from a beehive. The mystery of the dragons was becoming clearer, but now I had a bigger problem. How could I return to full size?

At first I had some notion of getting into the magician's workroom, searching his library for a spell, scavenging for the ingredients, and so forth. I easily entered the workroom by following the servants when they took in his food, which then went cold while he pored over his arcana. But the spell-books were huge tomes bound in dragonskin and embossed with glinting scales—I couldn't possibly get one down from the shelf or even lift up the covers of those lying on the table.

I considered announcing myself to the magician and begging his mercy. But he had no reason to be merciful: I'd attacked him at the dragons' nest, and surely he believed that only his quick defence had prevented me killing him. I thought about looking for other magicians who might be more sympathetic, but I was too scared to venture into a city full of sly cats, hungry dogs and unscrupulous butchers. I would be fried like a locust and served on a stick at some elf's midwinter dance.

Instead, I collected poisoned bait left for the rats. Then, when a servant next took Murre his dinner, I lugged the tainted grain into the magician's workroom. The kitchen people had made stew. They never bothered with gourmet cooking, since Murre didn't pay much attention to what he ate. As usual, he ignored the servant's visit and kept on reading his spell-books.

I needed to get up to the table. I began by climbing onto a discarded robe, holding my nose when I found it had recently been splattered with putrefying pus. Then I crawled along distillation tubes until I reached something old and ratty that might once have been a unicorn's tail. Trying not to sneeze from the dust, I climbed the tail up to the worktop—all this while carrying bulky grain, keeping death-quiet, and freezing every time the magician looked up from his book.

The room spooked me. Murre's grimoires reeked of age and danger. The workbench was covered in glutinous spills and fine yellow powder that I dared not step in. Most disturbing of all were the jars containing demon-heads, whose many-eyed stares seemed to follow me round the room. I feared that the captive demons would start shrieking, "Thief! Poisoner!"

I tiptoed across a metal device onto the table, then dropped the poison in Murre's dinner.

As I retraced my route along the worktop, I fancied one of the demon-heads winked at me. I scrambled to the ground and fled via the wainscot, braving the rats one more time.

All that night I worried. Would Murre eat his stew without noticing the poison? Had I put too much in? Or not enough? Next day I lurked by the kitchens to listen for the gossip. The servants were flustered, their routine disrupted. From my small perspective their expressions looked absurdly exaggerated, huge solemn frowns that might have been drawn by a child.

I smiled when I heard the cooks discussing their master's sudden illness. They started making broth, so I went upstairs and skulked until the maid arrived. I followed her into the magician's bedroom, where I had to wait for an age while she spooned soup into his mouth. Eventually Murre himself grew impatient and ordered her out. Good: he could speak. I'd fretted about giving him too much poison and killing him, but he was a lot bigger than a rat. Unlike me. The thought destroyed any sympathy I might have had.

When the maid left, I climbed up the bedcovers onto the bed. I drew my dagger and ran the length of Murre's body until I reached his throat. He didn't even notice me until he felt the sharp pinprick.

"Remember me?" I asked.

I retreated down the silk road of his chest so he could get a good look. He groaned.

"No more spells," I said. "I've poisoned you with a rare venom from the south, and if you kill me you'll never know the antidote."

"What do you want?" he snapped.

"Want? What do you think I want? I want my height back, you son of a leprous donkey."

I felt another rumbling groan through the soles of my feet. "Stop groaning and start chanting," I said. "Spell me back to full size, or I'll let the poison do its work."

He managed a sick-looking smile. "You think I'm capable of magic right now? If I were, I'd spell myself back to full health."

"Spare me the excuses." I almost enjoyed this. It's not often a steel-and-muscle guy like me gets the upper hand on a magician.

"No, really," he said.

"Then I'll just have to let you die and find someone else to do it."

Murre shook his head. "You don't need to do that. The spell's beginning to wear off. Already you're bigger than you were at first—haven't you noticed? I'd avoid confined spaces if I were you. The final recovery is sudden. You'll snap back to full height soon, and it could be uncomfortable if you're in the wrong place. Indeed, I would be grateful if you could refrain from standing on my body."

The way he said *uncomfortable* made me think it was a magician's euphemism for *fatal*. But this could be a con. I decided to change tack.

"Tell me about the dragons," I said. "How long have you been using them?" I waved my thorn-sized weapon as menacingly as I could.

Murre sighed. "A few years ago, I was an apprentice to old Erne, the best magician between the mountains and the sea. When a dragon turned up in Wenlock, the locals begged him for help, and he insisted that I come along. It was full size, of course—maybe a sixty foot wingspan."

I mentally revised this down to a more realistic thirty. Murre paused to cough, in great racking spasms. The earthquake in his chest threw me aside, but his soft, expensive sheets cushioned my fall. They smelled of sweat and rose-petal perfume.

"The dragon killed Erne," he said. "As Erne died he transferred his power to me. But

in the panic of the moment I could only remember one spell, so that's what I had to use. And it worked. With so much power behind the miniaturisation, the dragon shrank down to a few inches. It flew off, and I thought, *Good riddance.* The locals were very grateful, eventually. They wanted to see its body—it was weeks before they believed me when I said I'd magicked the dragon away. I didn't admit I'd only shrunk it, but I certainly never expected to see it again. After all, what harm could one tiny dragon do?"

"Plenty, if it was about to lay eggs."

"Yes, but I didn't know that at the time, did I?"

"You found out soon enough. You've been collecting from the descendants ever since."

Wearily, he shook his head. "Like I said, the miniaturisation spell is only temporary. It hasn't worn off yet because it had all Erne's power behind it. Maybe it'll last for centuries—but maybe it won't. That's what I've been checking up on. The treasure is just a bonus."

I laughed.

He looked angry. "You don't appreciate the problem. Eventually the original dragon will snap back to full size. Well, one dragon we can deal with, and maybe it's died anyway. But what if its hatchlings snap back too? It probably had twenty-odd eggs in its innards when I cast the spell. And even that's not the worst possibility. Suppose all the hatchlings' descendants—the whole nest—return to full size when the spell expires? It would be the greatest disaster in history."

"Then what have you been doing about it?"

"Figuring out the best thing to do," he said. "The spell's holding up. Erne was very powerful."

"So you've just been collecting the gold they accumulate—which doesn't give you much incentive to kill them. How do you get in the cliff, anyway?"

He wouldn't answer that, but I figured it out. "The miniaturisation spell really is temporary," I realised. "You just shrink down and walk through the dragons' entrance hole. You return to full size to fend them off and fill up your sack, then you shrink again to leave. No wonder I couldn't see you going in or out."

"Exactly," he said. "Now, about that poison. What is it?"

I smiled. "But as you said, I'm going to return to full size without your help. So I don't have to tell you, do I?"

I was only toying with him, as payback for my days of scavenging for scraps and fighting off the rats—I would have told him when he'd begged hard enough. But he snarled and made a grab for me. I raised my dagger just before his hand closed, and he impaled his palm on it. He screamed and jerked his arm away. I ran. His bed stood by the window, which was open a crack to let fresh air in. I scrambled onto the curtain and headed for the windowsill. The magician rang for his servants and yelled in a hoarse, cracked voice.

I ducked through the window and began climbing down the outside wall. I was so small that I found footholds in the gaps between bricks. But equally, I was so small that it was a long climb down. Before I reached the bottom, I heard Murre's servants arrive in the bedroom.

They emptied the piss-pot on me. Then they threw the piss-pot. It bounced off the wall just above me, creating a shower of brick-dust that stung my eyes. I didn't wait for the next missile. I jumped off the wall, rolled as I landed in a damp flowerbed, and started running.

Murre's estate backed onto an ambassador's vast gardens, where I'd already secreted my gains from sneaking into the magician's treasury. It took an age to reach the perimeter wall. I had grown confident in moving around the estate, but then no one knew about me. Now I felt

the terror of a mouse fearing the owl's gaze. Yet I attained the wall without trouble and found the right hole. I began crawling through the gap in the thick masonry. It was a much tighter fit than before. The magician had spoken truth when he said I'd grown bigger. *I'd avoid confined spaces if I were you.*

A dog barked nearby. I still smelt of piss: tracking me would be easy. In a frenzy of panic, I wriggled, squirmed, prayed to a dozen gods, and heaved with all the strength of mortal terror.

With one final surge I popped out of the wall. I sat on a dead leaf and panted. I knew I should move, but I couldn't.

Then I remembered that Murre didn't have any dogs. And I bumped my back painfully on the stone wall as I snapped to full size.

For the next few minutes I couldn't see very well. Everything looked tiny, and I kept peering at things and trying to refocus my eyes. The worst moment came when I retrieved the booty I'd stolen from the magician. *Is that all?* I thought, remembering the effort of lugging the huge boulders out of the treasury. Now the jewels seemed paltry drops of coloured glass that would vanish if I sneezed. At least I retained a few silver and copper from Cassia's advance.

I had enough ready cash to buy the comforts that I now badly needed. I slunk through the ambassador's gardens and into the streets of Silloth, where people hastened to get out of my way—I still reeked of piss, and my clothes were dirty, stinking tatters. First I visited a bathhouse, then a tailor, and finally the nearest tavern.

It was far too long since I'd had a drink and a conversation. I had been going mad from solitude, alone in the woods and then hiding in Murre's estate. Now, at last, I could enjoy some company. I bought drinks for everyone and talked all night long.

* * *

The next couple of days I spent procrastinating. I knew I should finish the job I'd been hired for. I knew I should go back, before the dragons shot up to full, terrifying size. Yet I kept putting it off. I'd undergone so much hardship that I needed time to rest and recover. And so I stayed in the King's Heads, drinking and chatting and brooding.

Until Cassia found me.

"You!" she said. "You lying, cheating bastard!"

"I can exp—" I began, but she rode right over me.

"I'm amazed you had the nerve to stay in the country—I suppose you were so anxious to spend my gold on drink that you stopped at the next city. How did you ever gain a reputation as a hunter? You —"

I raised my voice. "I said I can explain, if you give me the chance."

"Oh, I'm sure you can come up with a good excuse —"

"Listen!" I said. "This is important. You're in more danger than you know."

That got her attention. I summarised my adventures, omitting my visit to the magician's treasury. When I got to the rat poison, she said, "So that was you. I've just come from his house. His servants told me he won't be able to work magic for months."

"Why were you visiting him?" I asked.

"We'd given up on you, so we needed someone else to deal with the dragons. I tried Murre because he got rid of the dragon at Wenlock a few years back."

I laughed. "He only shrank it. That dragon is the ancestor of all the ones plaguing you."

When I'd brought her up to date, she said, "Then at any moment those dragons—one,

twenty, or all of them—might return to full size?"

I nodded.

"So what are you going to do about it?"

"Demand extra pay for the extra danger."

She brushed this aside. "What's your plan?"

I'd had plenty of time to think about this. "Cement," I said.

"Cement?" Cassia frowned.

"There are three holes in the cliff where they fly in and out. We have to assume that in winter, at night, they're all inside. If we stop up the holes—problem solved."

"You make it sound simple," she said.

"Let's hope it is."

* * *

I'm a hunter, not a craftsman. I listened politely when people suggested I needed plaster rather than cement. The experts were all free with their advice, but not one would accompany me to the dragon-hive. My stock was low, as everyone believed that I'd run off with Cassia's gold and she'd dragged me back.

"You were hired for the job—you do it." The universal message varied only in loudness and profanity.

So I learned how to mix the plaster myself. I wasn't going to make something that needed to stand up or look pretty. All the stuff had to do was set. Cassia bought the raw material and a mule to carry it.

"When do we start?" she said.

"We?" My tone was sour. I knew her help might be useful, but I resented the implication that she didn't trust me not to run off. Everyone had a low opinion of me. I was tempted to confirm their suspicion and throw them to the dragons, but I kept imagining the swarm at full size when the spell expired. They would burn the whole country to bedrock.

Cassia said, "I want to see it through. You don't know what it was like for us when you didn't come back. I can't go through that again. I have to know what happens."

"Then get some sleep," I advised. "We'll be up all night when the rain clears."

We set off one cold winter morning, picking our way through the trees beyond Cassia's farm. "I spent a lot of time in these woods as a child," she said. "In spring the trees are islands in a sea of bluebells. I collected firewood and hunted rabbits and squirrels."

"You wouldn't have much luck now," I said. The insatiable dragons had denuded the forest of life. No squirrels scurried along branches; no birds sang.

At twilight we ate, and waited for moonrise. The night was clear and frosty. We'd hardly seen any dragons—I hoped the cold had made them torpid.

The moon shining through the leafless canopy gave us enough light to proceed, though we had to coax the mule across the shadow-strewn ground. I let out a long-held breath as we arrived at the clearing to find it empty. No huge dragons, no griffins, no magicians. Just us. I nudged Cassia and pointed out the entrance holes, three dark stains on the cliff-face. Neither of us spoke, for fear of disturbing the dragons. The whole wood was quiet. No wind shook the trees, and a thick layer of ice covered the waterfall, muffling the trickle that crept down the cliff. The moonlight on the ice created constellations of glitter that out-dazzled the ancient, weary stars above.

We began at the ground-level hole, a low opening, where perhaps the stream had once issued in ages past. I mixed the plaster while Cassia hunted for rocks. We couldn't help making some noise, but no dragons came out to complain. When Cassia had blocked the entrance with stones, I slathered plaster everywhere, creating a smooth barrier. Cassia inspected my work to check for gaps and cracks. We were torn between the desire to do a good job, and the need to do it quickly. This was the easy hole.

The next was seven feet from the ground. Cassia and I took turns to piggyback each other, both of us ending up splattered with plaster. Afterward we rested, looking at our two white blotches on the cliff.

I contemplated the final entrance, a small shadowy gap high in the rock-face. I'd have to lower myself down to it. I marked a white line out from the cliff, so we'd know where to secure the rope. Then we started for the top. It was a long walk round, made even longer because Cassia insisted on bringing the mule with all our gear. I ached with fatigue.

The cliff sloped back enough that, knowing where to look, we could see down to the hole. I tied one end of the rope in a loop, making a crude sling to sit in, and lowered it down the cliff until the loop dangled at the entrance. I secured the slack round a tree-trunk at the top.

The eastern sky was brighter than the moon.

Cassia had finished mixing the rest of the plaster. I drew the rope back again, tied the half-full bucket to the loop, then carefully lowered it.

I needed something to stop up the hole, a base for the plaster. There were no stones at the top of the cliff, so I took some sackcloth from our pack and tied it to my belt.

All these preparations stretched my nerves taut enough to hammer like a dulcimer. At last I scrambled over the edge and began climbing down the rope. When I reached the loop, I poked my legs through and sat in the sling.

A dragon flew out of the cliff and bumped straight into my mask. I yelled in terror. The dragon hissed, then breathed fire in my face. I closed my eyes and felt scorching heat, as if my eyelids were shrivelling like dead leaves in a bonfire. I screamed again.

It took all my strength to ignore the dragon and grab the cloth hanging from my belt. I stuffed a great handful into the hole in front of me, and felt the impact of another dragon slamming against the wad. I gathered up more sackcloth and crammed it in, blocking the entrance hole completely.

The first dragon had wheeled round for another pass. My right arm was already up—I let go of the cloth and covered my eyes. The dragon's fiery breath scorched my wrist. The familiar smell of burnt leather stung my nose.

Still clutching the rope with my left hand, I dropped my right arm long enough to snatch at my dagger. The dragon saw this and flamed my left shoulder, then banked and wheeled.

I heard a *whirr*. Not two feet from my head, an arrow thunked into the dragon's body.

I looked up at Cassia kneeling on the cliff-edge. "Any more?" she called, picking up another arrow.

"No." I took several deep breaths. Then I reached into the bucket and started plastering for the last time.

* * *

Next day we waited to see if any dragons would break our seals or find another exit. To fend off sleep we talked and talked. I congratulated Cassia on her fine shot.

"I told you I've hunted before," she said. "As a child I used to shoot rabbits and imagine they were goblins. Killing monsters seemed so exciting."

I laughed. "Does it still look that way now? It's pest control, that's all. I'm just a rat-catcher with bigger prey. Usually, anyway."

"You're sick of it, aren't you?"

"Yes. But I'm not qualified for much else. And it pays well. Speaking of which —"

There was some dispute—there always is. We'd agreed one silver for every dragon killed. However, I'd only sealed them in. Even when I got Cassia to agree that this counted, there was the problem of estimating the number.

"Then there's my share of the treasure," I said.

Cassia nodded and held out her empty hand. "I hereby present you with one tenth of nothing."

I took her hand and held it. "It'll take a while for those dragons to starve. But in summer you'll be able to tunnel into the cliff and see what's there. You can get the treasure, count the corpses, and work out how much you owe me. I think I ought to stick around till then. Just to claim my rightful reward, you understand."

Cassia stood up. "Is money the only thing you're interested in? You're as gold-greedy as the dragons."

"They do say that some dragons can take on human shape," I said, smiling. "But if you like, I can show you I'm warm-blooded enough to be open to other offers."

I followed her out of the woods.

The End

Ian Creasey was born in 1969 and lives in Yorkshire, England. He began writing when rock & roll stardom failed to return his calls. His fiction has appeared in various publications, including Oceans of the Mind, Gothic.Net, Paradox, On Spec, and The Mammoth Book Of Legal Thrillers. His spare time interests include hiking, gardening, and environmental conservation work—anything to get him outdoors and away from the computer screen.

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parking garage. I shrugged. Like everything else on the Net, the Jag was a rental.

The entrance to the Galleria was noise and neon and all kinds of newbies trying to crash the exclusive party inside. At the front were a group of a giggling, high school girls, wearing the latest fashion trend—spangled bras and panties over see-through dresses, hair slicked back and flattened like a fin from an ancient, gas burning, '57 Cadillac, and dragon tattoos on their cheeks—trying to look hip enough to get in. They didn't stand a chance without the password. The word changes by the week. Finding it isn't difficult, if you're an old hand on the 'Nets like I am. As soon as the password changes, it's uploaded to me. For the past six months the password had been actresses from the twentieth century.

I pushed through the crowd and whispered, "Judy Garland." The opaque entrance irised open and I eased through, heading for the ramp of all worlds. Behind me, a hackermorph, synthesized as a small dog, tried to squeeze through, but the entrance closed quickly, slicing him in half.

"Nice try, Toto, but we're not in Kansas anymore," I told him, as his brown furry head sizzled.

He disappeared in a puff of smoke, his front paw lifted up and the middle toenail extended—an ironic salute to excellence. I didn't bother to return it and moved on.

The Galleria had a new look—staggered balconies and nooks with an illusory rustic lifestyle created by a Tuscan Mosaic facade. I know this because the web site's promo said so. It was supposed to be a return to Neo-Italian construction. I wasn't impressed. It was as chintzy as its advertising, and as far as I was concerned, they could throw the architects off a cliff and let God sort them out. Besides, by next week it would be torn down and a new look put in its place. Nothing stays put for very long on the 'Nets.

I ignored the facade and headed toward the third level and a joint called Sloppy Joes, a recreation of Hemingway's favorite bar in Key West. I passed a solid pyramid of obsidian overlaid with crystal: Grafart titled the "Wail of Souls." Artist unknown. The piece must be special because it had been in the Galleria almost a week—an eternity on the HoloNets. But if you looked closely you could see why. Etchings of naked people glimmered from the interior of the crystal. They moved with the shifting light, clawing at the surface, their mouths open in silent screams.

I stopped and admired it; I could also see my reflection clearly. I shrugged and everything fell neatly into place. I brushed back my blond hair and adjusted the cut of my suit on my two-meter frame. Fashion ebbs and flows on the web like the tides and it's almost a full time gig, staying hip. But on the 'Nets, if you don't want to be a wallflower, you have to play the part. Double-breasted coats were back. I'm not certain that I like them, but they do make me more intimidating.

On the other side of the pyramid was a flower lady. I waved my hand over one of her displays and a carnation vanished. I snapped my fingers and it appeared in my lapel. Slipping my hand behind her ear, I produced a ten-credit chip out of thin air.

"Magic can change your life," I said, adjusting the flower, and with a smile, I told her to keep the change.

She never even batted an eyelid, just stuffed the credit chip down her shirtfront—a cold bank if there ever was one.

I hit the ramp to the upper levels and rode a cushion of air upwards. The ride feels like the weightlessness of space and I never tire of it. On the third level I let myself off easily, stepping around a newbie sprawled on his face at the top of the ramp. I wondered how this clueless moke

had ever gotten hold of the password.

Sloppy Joes was in front of me. It was a dive; the food was so bad, they needed a sign out front that said, "Sorry, We're Open." But it's home to grifters and barflies and a good place to meet my contact. Inside, the bar smelled of stale conversation and too much cologne. A blue marlin arched over the mirror behind the bar. The lights were dim and the Holovision was muted so that you had to stand real close to hear or see anything the actors were saying and doing. I didn't mind, though; the somewhere that blonde waited for me was supposed to be this place.

Josie Russell, the bartender, set up a Martian martini, dry, just the way I like it, winked and glanced down the bar. It stretched out in front of the silver-blue mirror like a coral reef in front of a diamond sand beach and at the end sat a redhead. You could tell from the way she was sitting that she was tall and wouldn't have any trouble making the rent. I smiled. I had a knack for finding redheads or maybe they just had a knack for making a fool out of me. In either case, it was fast and fun, and if the ride was furiously expensive, I didn't care. I could win the Lotto any Saturday night I decided to play.

I fingered the jack below my left ear and pushed the drink away, sighing. I was thinking about Marcia and the package. I slipped Josie a five-credit chip and smiled when he nearly broke a tooth on the plassilver.

"Marcia," I said.

Josie shook his head and worked real hard to keep his eyes looking into mine. "I don't know any Marcia, Wil." He laid the chip back on the bar.

I eased the five-credit chip toward his hands and this time I said real softly, "Marcia. She has a package for me." I spread my hands about 15 centimeters apart and 36 centimeters tall. "She said she'd bring it tonight."

I gave him my flinty-eyed stare, which can send a big man gibbering into the corner. Josie was a two-bit hustler who ran a few cons on the side to make ends meet. A two-time loser, one more indiscretion and he'd have a permanent reservation at Statesville Prison. He was panicky now. His mouth worked but no sound came out. He backed away from the bar leaving the chip behind. A nice touch. But it was too pat.

That's when the redhead at the other end of the bar made her move. Maybe she was nervous or the distance was too great in the dim light. The laser burn from her pistol whispered by my ear and charred the wallpaper behind me. I had time to pull my Baretta from its shoulder holster and burn her between her breasts. I watched her sizzle and disappear in smoke and didn't feel bad about it either. She wasn't the woman I was looking for.

Josie had his hands in the air. "Sorry, Wil . . . I . . . I didn' know it was going to be a hit."

I nodded. "Sure you didn't." I slipped the safety back on and shoved the pistol inside my suit. I ordered a scotch, neat, and searched the twenty or so time-battered and life-bruised faces in the bar as I sipped it. Marcia's wasn't among them. I checked my wristpad's chrono. She was late and I was beginning to think something wasn't right. I told Josie I'd be back and left the five credits on the bar to pay for the wallpaper.

I walked through the double doors and a fist rammed into my stomach. I dropped to the floor, gasping for breath.

An Oscar-winning performance.

You see, as a virtual human, pain isn't palpable. If it were, players would run the risk of becoming permanently traumatized by whatever happens to us, their alter egos. This way I can be shot, knifed, even boiled in oil (yes, the sheer depths of cliché people descend to on the 'Nets is its own paradigm of the human condition) and my host will never suffer permanent psychological

or physical shock. Even so, though we feel nothing, alters act the part whether we're assaulted or caressed.

I wheezed as a pair of hands wrenched me to my feet and shoved my back against the doorjamb. Then I stared into the cold, red-rimmed, baby blues of Captain Dix Macon. His nose had been crushed and left flat; ears were clipped like a Doberman's; and he smelled like ninety-day whiskey poured into a rumpled brown suit. His head was capped by a battered brown fedora. Dix had been trying to bust me for years, ever since I solved the Millennium murders. He was a good piece of work even if he wasn't a player. By that I mean he wasn't an alter ego like me. He was part of the repertory of holoactors, created by the Gamelan to fill out the cast of characters for the P.I. Net's on-going, many-tiered storyline.

"Willie-boy," he said, staring at me, his booze-soaked breath making my eyes water. "A little early for target practice, isn't it?"

I smiled down at him. "You need a new suit, Dix."

He ignored my sartorial critique. "Josie just called; said there's a dead woman inside and you're the man who iced her."

I shrugged. "Self defense; she tried to give me too close a shave."

"Now why would she do that? Unless you had something she wanted."

"I have a lot of things women want," I said, winking at him.

Dix drove his other fist into my stomach. The drinking had caught up with him and his left only shook me up a bit.

"That jog your memory any?"

"My memory is like your left, Dix. It's not as good as it used to be."

His hands tightened on my lapels. "The package," he rasped, and I was glad he had given up cigarettes, or his breath would have seared my eyebrows. "Tell me what's inside the package," he said.

I shrugged. "I don't know."

I really didn't. My client had paid me 25,000 credits to pick up the package for him. He had described the woman, Marcia, who had it, but hadn't volunteered any other information. For 25K I wasn't going to ask him any questions either. What surprised me was that someone had tipped off Dix about it. Only my client, Marcia and I were supposed to be privy to the exchange. After the redhead tried to burn me and now Dix's inquiry, I had the sinking feeling that a lot of people wanted to get their hands on that package. But I didn't say that to Dix.

"Maybe you should ask the redhead," I suggested helpfully.

"Convenient that she's dead, isn't it," he snarled. "Back inside, Willie-boy, while I ask Josie a few questions; then we're going to take a little ride downtown."

Before I could stop him, he tossed me through the double doors of Sloppy Joes. I saw the bar and Josie, whirling like a carousel, then my head slammed into something hard.

-2-

Inside Willie Beeman's mind, images suddenly faded to static. Cascades of snow roared past his eyes and a harsh buzzing clamored in his ears. He thought dispassionately that it couldn't be sun interference. The NASA Clan's L-1 Space Colony where he lived and worked was presently on the dark side of the Earth and there were no solar flares or sunspot activity anyway. Most likely the blow to Wil Drake's head had somehow triggered a signal overload from the P.I. Net into his brain.

Willie reached for the cable to disconnect the interface before the overload could generate a cascade failure in his neural net. But his hand did not move. The static paralyzed him. His whole body shook as synaptic functions fired irregularly across his web. If he didn't disconnect soon, the overload would fry his neurons and Willie Beeman, waiter, would become a vegetable.

Vainly, he tried to control the seizures but his physical functions were shorting out. He started to lose consciousness when abruptly the seizures stopped and the Holovision reappeared, surreal and garbled as if two images were superimposed.

-3-

Wil Drake (me) woke up on the floor of Sloppy Joes.

The room felt different. For one thing, the wallpaper smoldered from the laser flash that had just missed me. Also, the smell of burnt flesh from the neat pinhole I had put in the redhead nearly made me gag. And I was sweating.

I shook my head in disbelief and discovered that was the wrong thing to do. A Viennese bell choir and an Irish penny whistle band began competing for attention within my skull. I ducked between the bells and whistles until my mind cleared and the pain went away.

It was all too real. Intense sensory stimulation was unavailable on the Gamelan's HoloNets. Period. That kind of interactive Net was for the extremely wealthy. So why was I, an alter from the low level Nets, all of a sudden feeling the slings and arrows of life usually relegated to those with outrageous fortunes? It didn't make sense.

I stood up unsteadily and looked around. Sloppy Joes was dark; Josie, Dix and the patrons had vanished. In their place behind the bar stood two Toyos dressed in illegal shark skin suits, the flame-colored, dragon tattooing of the Toyota Clan jutting above their suit collars onto their necks.

They didn't see me.

The little one was arguing vehemently. The big one was nodding and bowing. I manipulated the receptor behind my left ear and the image cleared a little. I left my hand there. I wanted to be able to disconnect quickly if I had to.

Then, as I watched, my field of vision contracted and Sloppy Joes disappeared completely. I wasn't blind; it was as though a very dense fog enveloped me and sight and sound were muffled.

Slowly, the gray dissolved. When I could see clearly again, I was standing in a different room. Behind the Toyos a port window framed familiar constellations. Gravity was lighter too, about one-sixth of Earth normal, I reckoned. That meant I had to be on one of the NASA Orbiting Colonies somewhere on the ring where the axial spin was reduced to lessen gravity.

The two men had followed and continued talking in low tones. The room was still fuzzy. I adjusted the receptor again and abruptly everything came into view clearly like perfect video.

This shook me up more than the change of scenery had. Even with the best of conditions nothing was ever this clear on the Gamelan. It was set up strictly for low-end users like Willie Beeman. The reception was so out of the ordinary that I got the uneasy feeling someone, screwing with Continuity, which gives structure to all of Cyberspace, had somehow transferred Wil Drake's heuristic pattern into the exclusive private HoloNets, where only high rollers—Clan leaders and their families—played. How? I couldn't even begin to speculate.

Sure, as an alter ego, I can access a lot of information through the web's databases. But basically, I'm an extension of Willie's mind, which means I'm supposed to be only as brilliant and dazzling as he wants to be—and that boy can't even read and write. I have to tap into the

Gamelan's dictionary and learning programs to make out a menu. So while I could tell you what was going on, I hadn't the foggiest notion of how to explain it to you.

Meanwhile, I was left standing there, wondering what happened to my host. It wasn't the first time I had felt disassociated since Willie dreamed me up. But usually those are only short periods of time, like transitioning from one venue on the net to another. This was the first time I had ever been on the private 'Nets, and right now I was fighting a nagging feeling that Willie was somehow incapacitated and I was in this gig alone. In spite of Willie's shortcomings, I could have used his limited mind for a little direction.

Just then, the Toyos noticed me, and all speculations would have to go unanswered.

The little one yelled in perfect System English, "Hey! What the hell are you doing here?"

The big one just gaped. Then he grunted and bowed at me. "Why are you here?" he said, nervously. "We're supposed to call the Fat Man after we received the package."

I knew that I should disconnect before this became ugly. On the other hand, I'm Wil Drake, Private Eye, and pretty tough—a master of so many deadly fighting arts, I have to carry a concealed weapons permit for my tongue.

I ignored his question and gave them both my flinty-eyed stare. "That's a funny one, Toy Boy. The Fat Man sent me to check up on you. Now, where's the item?"

The two talked excitedly in low tones. I couldn't make out what they were saying, but I didn't like the way the little one was making a bookmark of my face. He wasn't buying any of it, but the big one pushed him out of the way and said, "We haven't been able to obtain it, yet."

"You'd better find it, chop chop. You know what the Fat Man does to failures." The big Toyo turned white under his tattoos and started bobbing up and down like a demented Jack-in-the-Box.

"I'll be back," I said flatly in my best Schwarzenegger, wondering who the Fat Man was.

I turned to leave when the little Toyo pulled a laser pistol from beneath his coat and pointed it at my head. "Stop!" he ordered.

The big one looked surprised and grabbed his partner's arm. "Don't. The Fat Man will kill us."

"You idiot!" the little one screamed, pulling his arm free. "He isn't the Mailman."

Busted. I held up my hands while taking a few steps toward the door. "Just kidding, guys. I'm looking for Marcia," I said, saying the first thing that popped into my mind. Not the best P.I. response, but I was still shaken up by the change in HoloNets, and the lack of Willie's presence made me nervous.

And then the puzzle got more interesting.

"He knows Marcia!" the big one shouted.

"Grab the son of a bitch!" the other one ordered.

The big Toyo rushed around the edge of the desk, cutting me off from the door. He tried to tackle me. I ducked under his arms, and in the low gravity, sent him flying into a chair. It rolled on castors and crashed into a bulkhead, dumping the Toy boy on the floor. I bolted for the door. My first step sent me bounding into the air. My head brushed the ceiling. A laser shot went between my legs, just missing my thigh, and a pin sized, smoldering dot appeared in the doorframe. I landed, jerked on the handle and ran out of the room, slamming the door behind me.

I stopped. A foreboding like crushed ice slithered down my spine as I stared through plasglass windows at the space colony's dreidl-shaped central Hub. Blazing jets of violet gas limned its cascading levels in the blackness of space. I recognized the vista since it was a part of Willie Beeman's world. I was on the Freeport side of NASA's L-1 colony, the oldest of the orbiting

colonies and the transit point for Luna commerce and deep space traders. And the place where my host, Willie Beeman, lived and worked as a waiter in order to pay for his web habit as me.

-4-

How Wil Drake, P.I., had ended up on a Clan's private HoloNet recreation of L-1 was beyond me. But I wasn't about to stop and set up a chat room to discuss it. I shed my paralysis and started to run, only I was too late.

Behind me the door to the room banged open and the Toyos rushed through it. Only one way left to escape. I grasped the receptor below my ear.

Disconnecting was, admittedly, a cheap way out of a difficult situation. As a well-known, resourceful and tough private detective on the P.I. 'Nets, I don't ordinarily use it. But this was a strange situation. I was no longer on the P.I. Net and these Toy boys meant to capture me.

Capture of an alter is a situation every player in the Gamelan avoids at all costs. Six hours is the saturation level for anyone jacked in. More than that and a host risks demolition—fried neurons and permanent brain damage.

Even if Willie didn't see the danger, I did. I unjacked as the men lunged toward me.

I smiled, expecting to see the Toyos vanish as the picture in Willie Beeman's mind faded like a TV screen to a black dot—metaphorically speaking.

It didn't happen.

I stared at them like a Houdini whose sleight of hand trick failed. Then the bigger of the two Toyos wrenched my arm behind my back. His other hand grabbed my wrist. He jammed the jack back into the receptor below my ear and twisted it violently.

My shoulder screamed with agony as the Toyo slammed my body against the plasglass windows of the corridor. He squashed my face against the glass as though he were going to push me through it molecule by molecule. As a P.I. you get roughed up quite a bit, but on the Gamelan it wasn't supposed to hurt. This was definitely becoming too real.

"Who sent you?" the little one shouted.

I couldn't think of a straight answer to that one. My brain was fogged, not so much from the pain, but from the perplexing quandary that Wil Drake shouldn't be here. When I had pulled the plug from my receptor, all of this should have become a fading incubus in the mind of one Willie Beeman, waiter. So here I was as real as, well, Willie, I suppose. I stared helplessly out the windows at a gibbous Earth in a deep, dark well beneath me. L-1 was passing over Lake Michigan, and even from 12,000 miles, I could see the Chicago Corridor sprawling up the western shore to Lake Superior like a smear of sludge with 50 million pinpricks of light scattered through it.

The big Toyo wrenched my arm harder and shooting pain brought me back to virtual reality.

The little one pressed his laser pistol beneath my left eye. The barrel looked big enough to swallow an elephant. "Who sent you? I'll give you five seconds."

"Go ahead, pull the trigger. Kill me and you'll never find out, Toy boy," I said in my best private eye voice and immediately hoped he wouldn't take me up on my offer. I was out of the playbook as far as HoloNet guidelines went, and I felt like an ancient mariner with a parchment map looking at the edge of the ocean and the warning, "Here be dragons." I had no idea what would happen to me or Willie Beeman if the Toyo actually did pull the trigger.

The small Toyo smiled, gold fillings and bad teeth, like a Kung Fu HoloNet villain. "We

won't kill you—right away. Yoshi here will rip your arms off first. Believe me, you will tell us what we want to know before you die." His dialogue was as bad as his teeth and I wondered if someone was feeding his host lines. I shifted my head a fraction and squeezed a look at Yoshi. He actually snarled, the same metal mangled smile as the little one.

Yoshi had my right arm twisted behind me and my left arm plastered against the plasglass near my face. While the Toyos argued about which arm to rip out first, the big one loosened his grip a little. It was all I needed. I stomped his instep. He grunted in pain and let go. I spun off the glass and slammed my knee into his groin. He hit the floor like a side of beef falling from a truck.

The little one pulled the trigger of his laser pistol and swung the weapon in a hissing arc toward me. The smell of burning metal and plastic filled the corridor. Stepping inside the sweep of his arm, I chopped him in the throat with the ridge of my hand and the pistol clattered to the floor. I dragged both men back into the room and threw the laser pistol into the garbage chute.

L-1 covers a lot of space. The station is over a mile across from one side of the ring to the other. From the ring, twenty spokes intersect with the Hub—fifty-three levels and plenty of places to hide. But I didn't even give it a second thought. I entered the first room that wasn't locked and stopped cold. At the far end against an exterior bulkhead, Willie Beeman was lying on his bunk, one end of a cable jacked behind his ear and the other into a HoloNet interface.

My mind went into a holding pattern. For a few moments I wondered if he could see me seeing him, seeing me, like one of those infinite mirror-into-mirror images.

Then, I came out of my stupor. I realized that this wasn't the real Willie Beeman, of course. It was a holoactor, like Dix Macon, simulating him. But I shuddered anyway. After all, I sprang from the real Willie's deepest and darkest yearnings, and I owed my existence to his controlled schizoid experience.

Even though the figure on the bed wasn't my real host, I couldn't suppress the achy feeling of bitter regret for Willie's life as a webhead. I knew if I could, I'd pull the plug on him. However, I also knew that was impossible. My reality lay in a gossamer of the purest silver laid across Willie's brain.

The filigreed, silver neural net in Willie's head was called a Black Widow by all the netjunkies. Willie had had his Black Widow for a year now. At first he had promised himself only twice a week for an hour. Eventually he had succumbed, and like a junkie, jacked in every day. Once Jim, the cook who rented the lower bunk from the bartender, found Willie twitching in a petit mal seizure and had to disconnect him (or was it me, sometimes I lose the thread). It was twenty-four hours before Willie could walk again.

The Black Widow wasn't a bad job coming from a Hong Kong cut shop. Using some water ration cards he had stolen, Willie paid a second class Vested of the AMA Clan to implant the neural web. The Vested—serf in an earlier age of Earth's history—began by removing the top half of Willie's skull. A neural synthchip replaced the mastoid nerve and was connected to a jack implant behind his left ear. Then the Vested laid a silver net, the wires gossamer thin like a spider's web, across the left hemisphere's ventro medial region and hard wired it to the synapses on the underside of his frontal lobe controlling higher cognitive functions, including speech, hearing and eyesight.

Presto. A webhead was born.

A week after the Vested glued his skull back together, Willie could have jacked himself into any program on the Commercial Nets. He could have gone to college and gotten a PhD in less time than it takes to shave. But he didn't. Willie was far from unusual in his lack of

motivation to better himself. Ninety percent of the world is bailing water from the same sinking lifeboat as Willie—cradle to grave internet for Mr. and Mrs. Everyman. The web sees all, hears all, knows all, but no one bothers to ask. A golden age listened to by people with ears of brass. I could write a book on the subject, but no one could read it.

Like most users, Willie stayed exclusively within the Gamelan; in his case, mired within the P.I. Net. Not that I'm complaining. That's where I, Willie's alter ego, a tough private dick, was born.

Gamelan is the cyberjocks' name for the virtual world of the HoloNets created within the web. The name comes from an obscure Javanese orchestra of tuned metal and wooden chimes mixed with percussion instruments. The music is wild and hypnotic and once plugged into it, a person can't help but dance to the beat, no matter where it takes him. Similarly, a host hooks into the Gamelan with thousands of others, experiencing the same surreal adventures and not knowing exactly where he'll end up, but not really caring. He has none of the pain and all of the glory.

That's why so many people become webheads, Willie included.

After the operation, Willie used the rest of the water rations to bribe a First Class Vested in the NASA Clan for a one-way ticket on the shuttle to the Freeport side of NASA's L-1 colony. He became a waiter on L-1, as far from Earth as any non-vested could ever hope to be. Tips barely covered his habit. But the Black Widow was great . . . even a half price one. And life on L-1 was infinitely better than on Earth, where the vast majority of humanity lived in a waterless jungle of rationing in the giant City Corridors. Most were Clanless Hilljacks, like Willie, who survived day-to-day on government handouts.

Though Willie had to ease up on his web use, I knew even better, with the same, bitterly frank introspection of an addict that long ago Willie had given himself over to the neural web. He didn't have the guts to pull the plug on the HoloNets—thank God. Sooner or later the Black Widow would devour him, though. Like a lot of netjunkies, he'd ride it past saturation all the way to demolition, then I would vanish—a wisp of blue smoke in his vegetated brain, not even an after image on somebody's DVD to remember me by.

But I would not, could not ask him to stop. His brain was the only game in town for me.

I shook my head free of its downward spiral of maudlin self-examination. I normally wouldn't have given a webhead's addiction a second thought. Right now there were too many other urgent questions and I needed some 411 right away. Who was screwing with Continuity so that my P.I. gig had become mixed in with a Clan's private HoloNet? Why had they gone to the elaborate trouble of creating a holo-adventure, which included all of L-1 with my host as a part of the scenery? And how did Marcia and the package figure into all of this? I wasn't going to find any answers standing here, and those Toy boys wouldn't stay knocked out forever. Soon they would be looking for me. I'd have to hide.

The simplest way to cover my tracks should have been to jack out. Then, when Willie jacked back in at a later date, this would all change and no one would be hunting me. At least that's what I hoped. But when I had attempted to disconnect in the corridor, nothing. Maybe Willie had tried the same thing in the real world and had come up with the same response. But I had the strange feeling—there were a lot of them by now to keep separate and they all seemed to run together, making me edgy all the time—that Willie wasn't even trying. Perhaps the blow to the head I received in Sloppy Joes had knocked him unconscious. Whatever. By now I was certain I was on my own for the time being. So, I tried a million-to-one chance. I went over to the Willie Beeman holofigure, hoping if I twisted his connection free, I would fade out. Static boomed

in my head from a feedback loop—like looking at the inside of a distorted radio wave—and I nearly passed out before I staggered out of range. My eyes throbbed and I rubbed my temples until my head was clear. At this point, I couldn't help but think that Murphy's laws were the most hopeful principles of cyberspace.

It was looking like I'd have to find some other way to disconnect me. I checked my chrono: four hours until demolition. Plenty of time, if those Toyos didn't stop me first. They wouldn't take long to search this section of the ring once they woke up. I had to find a place to hide out and snoop at the same time.

Whenever the situation becomes really bleak, I listen to that little voice in my head that tells me what I should do. (Warning: little voices can be like a magnum of champagne; an occasional sip over the course of an evening is enlightening; take too much and you think it's never wrong.) Anyway, my little voice told me to replace Willie's life as a waiter. Somehow it seemed appropriate, with a holofigure existing as Willie on this private Net, that I continue in his stead.

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I tore off my double-breasted suit and stashed it behind one of the other bunks. Then I quickly oiled my body, the way the waitrons at the Skyview Lounge do, giving my physique a bronze-hued look like Willie's Adonis body. Not too much of a stretch; after all, Willie and I look alike—two meters tall, 100 ki's of rugged muscle, and as good looking as a Greek statue. Our pectorals were highly defined and nicely set off by a triple window tattoo—a good forgery of the Microsoft Clan. We shared the strong muscular shoulders of a bodybuilder and the long curly blond hair and beautiful face that cause tourist women to give extra large tips. The tattoo didn't hurt any either.

I didn't have time to pump up at the gym, but a quick look in the mirror told me I could pass muster. I grabbed Willie's loincloth and threaded my way through the cluttered room. It was laid out just like Willie's real-life room on the station, where he sublet bunk space from the Skyview Lounge's bartender. The bartender had installed hydroponic equipment and grow lights to grow fresh tomatoes, cucumbers and lettuce to supplement the processed protein mash served in the Freeport cafeterias.

I blew past pens holding rats (the other white meat) and into the corridor. I sealed the door behind me, so the Toyos couldn't break in, and pushed off in the one-sixth gravity headed for the nearest air lock.

As I waited to cycle through the lock to the long corridor, which led to the main part of the station, I had a good view of L-1's outer ring. I marveled at the uncanny details in this private Net—just like the original. Everywhere surplus shuttle fuel tanks dotted the sky. Mostly the alloy-rich shells were hauled in by scavengers who sold them to the NASA Clan for reuse in the space program. A few, however, were used as living quarters for workers in the colony. In the real world, one scavenger, Sevros Markos, provided them on a lease back scheme. He welded several of them together and then outfitted them with plush accommodations for wealthier Clan members who wanted to enjoy the lighter gravity sports of L-1's outer ring during their stay.

The real Sevros had been a Hilljack who had come up with the construction crew for L-1. He could have retired to Earth after construction and lived well in the Corridors, but he had stayed on in the salvage trade. It was rumored that once he became wealthy, he never stirred from his quarters in the outer ring, enjoying the longevity benefits of light gravity. Still, even in

semi-retirement he knew everything that happened on the station, legal or otherwise.

It occurred to me standing there, that if this private Net was so detailed as to include space flotsam and Willie Beeman, then the regular crew aboard the station must have been replicated too with holoactors to play them. That meant Sevros' doppelganger was somewhere in this holo-adventure. Sooner or later, I figured, it would be good to talk with him. It was a long shot, but he might even be the real Markos' alter-after all this was a high end Net. If that were true, maybe he could explain what was going on and even help disconnect me.

The airlock opened onto one of the spokes leading to the main Hub of the L-1 Colony. I glided toward the core in that funny half lope, half dance step that one-sixth gee requires, and then waited for one of the Hub's airlocks to cycle by. The Hub spun faster than the outer ring of the station, giving it a more Earth-like gravity. Some tourists came up as I waited, walking tentatively and holding onto side rails to steady themselves. They were dressed in tuxedos and gowns and I could hear the women titter appreciatively as they looked at my broad, muscled back and massive thighs. I was a little anxious myself. I didn't want to be stuck waiting for the airlock if the Toy boys suddenly pelted down the corridor.

I glanced back nervously; the way was clear and I sighed with relief. Then, one of the women winked at me. I mean, she gave me a 'Hi, I haven't seen you naked for a long time' wink. The man on her arm didn't say or do anything. He stared ahead like a robot.

I suddenly realized I had no reliable means of distinguishing alter egos from holofigures on this private Net. Holofigures were stock characters that played within a set of parameters established by the guidelines of the Net. They could learn new situations and adapt to them but they always reacted like their stock character would act. They had no free will. An alter ego, on the other hand, could do whatever his host's mind could think up for him. I had been on the P.I. Net long enough that I had an intuitive feel for who was an alter and who was an actor there, but I didn't know enough about this Net to make any sound judgments. Asking was so nouveau and only showed you didn't understand the etiquette of the game. Now watching the tourists, I realized I had suddenly been flung into a paranoid world where every man sported a laser pistol and every woman carried an ivory-handled stiletto strapped to her thigh, ready to shove it between my ribs. Given my recent and painful encounter with the Toy Boys, I didn't want to do anything that might offend someone and leave me cut up, or worse.

I gulped, smiled and winked back, hoping it was the right thing to do. I turned away and waited for the airlock, trying to ignore the uncomfortable itch between my shoulder blades.

The airlock cycled and I stepped carefully into the Hub. Only a newbie hustled across the threshold to be slammed by the Earth-like gravity. I moved slowly, feeling the weight begin as a thickening goo around my feet, as though the air were more dense somehow and harder to push through. By the time I reached the Skyview Lounge and its clear crystal dome providing a stunning panorama of the Milky Way, I was walking easily through the sixty-six percent of Earth normal gravity that the Hub advertised.

I could have gone straight to the kitchen, but Willie's shift didn't start for a few minutes, so I stopped in at the bar. Whoever was running this Net had done a stunning job of recreating the lounge and its exotic bartender, a space farer from Tau Ceti.

Though bipedal, he wasn't even remotely human. His feet operated as a second pair of hands and his eyes protruded from his skull on stalks like a spiny fish. One color, they were compound like a dragonfly's. He could see infinitely in several directions and even into the infrared band. A fleshy appendage on his face passed for a nose and two small concavities on either side of his hairless head were his ears.

In the real world, he had wandered into Sol System, as the traveling minstrel that he was, the first deep space alien to visit our solar system. Earth had feted him for six months. During that time, engineers asked him to explain how he made the deep space voyage so quickly, or if Tau Cetans used suspended animation techniques. The bartender was no scientist. He was a traveling man, a hobo by name, a tramp on a tramp steamer. His solar sail wasn't even as efficient as Earth models. Tau Cetans simply lived longer so they could take longer trips. He was born 506 light years ago and he figured he had another 8000 or 10,000 good years left. He had a lot of time to explore the wonders of the galaxy, and he stopped at a few planets along the way to relieve the boredom of long space flight. Eventually he had made his home on L-1 because the gravity was better for his race, and he could see some exotic things he wouldn't be able to see on Earth.

As I entered the bar, I unballed the loincloth in my fist and draped it over my head. In the real world, Willie thought this made the bartender laugh, though it was hard to tell with him; there aren't many clues to a Tau Cetan's emotions. The bartender fixed a glittering eye on me, which seemed to say it all—Willie was a couple of months behind on his rent and hadn't paid his 'Nets bill. The bartender's other eye never wavered from the brandy bottle he was emptying into a biocrystal decanter. The living crystals fed on the alcohol imparting a pleasant smoky after taste to the liqueur.

I didn't greet him by name. I couldn't pronounce it. Nobody from Earth could. It's a sound like a bullfrog on a warm summer night—Grrrunhnk. Willie called him Enobarus. He didn't seem to mind. I did the same.

Enobarus's System English and Japanese were good, but he was also fluent in the Classical Earth languages, like German and French. Yet he preferred the Hawaiian pidgin of Earth's Hilljacks, and like Lewis Carroll's caterpillar, he borrowed words from any language when it suited him.

His one eye continued to stare at me as I crossed the lounge to the bar. It was disconcerting to think that he was following my image, reproduced 60,000 times in the glittering facets of his iris, and I wondered if he could tell that I wasn't Willie the waiter but Wil Drake the private eye.

"Hey, blalah," he reverberated in pidgin, welcoming me as a friend and brother. Enobarus didn't have tracheal equipment like ours to form words. Instead, he mixed echoes in the cavities of his skull to create language. A simple word like "hello" might have twenty mixings before exiting from his lipless mouth with a cavernous sibilance. Having a conversation with him was like talking into a deep well. "You got da kine?" he asked me.

Point of syntax: kine is a versatile word and can mean anything, rent, food, last week's soy burger. A blalah always knows what it expresses, when and how to use it. If you have to ask what it means, you ain't a blalah.

I knew Willie was flat broke and didn't have the money he owed Enobarus. I said, "I will tonight, blalah, if Marcel no moke be. If I get good tables, I have da kine is all."

Enobarus nodded, turned away and, standing like a flamingo, made two drinks with three limbs.

Inwardly, I breathed a sigh of relief as Willie's pidgin came easily to me. I suppose it should have; after all, his memories were mine. But ever since the run in with Dix Macon and the bump on the head at Sloppy Joes, I worried the connection to Willie wasn't as strong as it should be. I was feeling a little hung out there—more on my own than I should be. In fact, I seemed to be doing a lot more thinking for myself than . . . well, ever. Not that I wanted to

complain to anyone about it; Willie was a dolt compared to me. But my existence depended upon his mind staying in as reasonable a state of health as any net junkie's can be; that feeling of separateness, like being on the point of fading away or as though my body were rippling in some kind of Continuity distortion, was disconcerting.

Before I could follow this thought any farther, Enobarus swiveled one eye back on mine. "No care now. Da kine come bimebye. One more month." He finished the drinks. Then, "You find wahine me?" he asked, his eyes glittering even more than usual.

I blinked. Women were attracted to him—maybe it was his completely hairless body—and he didn't need me as a dating service.

"I thought you no problem with da wahines. You mo bettah than any blalah."

"Bimebye, no wahine." He shrugged. "Kefe. You help, blalah?"

"No worry. I find da wahine. But I need da kine for da kine."

Enobarus nodded in the bartender's universal way of knowing what you're talking about. He set up a scotch neat on the house and went to the other end of the bar.

I sipped my drink and checked my chrono—demolition in less than four hours. Somehow it no longer felt like plenty of time. I needed to find Marcia quickly. That little voice inside me told me she and the package were mixed up in this mix up of HoloNets. For one thing, the Toyos mentioned her, which meant there was a high probability she was on this private Net somewhere. Everyone came to the Skyview Lounge eventually, and maybe the bartender had seen her.

Enobarus returned like Hardy's native "Blalah," I asked him, "You seen a blonde wahine, true thing, no Clairol, about so high?" I held my hand near my shoulder. Marcia is nearly as tall as I am with a Xena body.

Enobarus was a good blalah, knew almost everything one needed to know in the universe and volunteered nothing, unless you were a friend. "Earlier, a blonde wahine came in bimebye carrying da kine. Is all."

My favorite Marcia.

"Thanks. Let me know if she comes in again."

I sipped my drink and willed Marcia to walk into the bar at that moment. Cyberspace magic. Sometimes on the HoloNets, if you can visualize what you want clearly enough, you get what you ask for. But she didn't walk in. My magic was feeling pretty low just then. I finished the scotch and thanked him for the drink before shoving off for the kitchen.

I looked around the bar. It was early for a Saturday Night on L-1. The place was only a third full. In a corner by the kitchen two Alphans, who had come back with a deep space crew, were practicing their English, which they had learned on the six year voyage here.

I entered the kitchen and noticed that all the personnel of the Skyview Dining Room were lined up so that the Maitre'd, Marcel, could inspect them. Anyone whose body was blemished by a bruise or a cut would not be allowed to work this shift. Any imperfection would be noticed by the diners and would tarnish the reputation of the Skyview. I donned my loincloth and took my place at the end of the line.

The line rippled with muffled amusement, waiters and waitresses laughing silently at Marcel's obesity. Marcel was the only member of the restaurant staff wearing full clothes. He dressed in a gaudy, emerald-green, velvet tuxedo, but even this couldn't hide the elephantine folds of skin. Marcel's System English was perfect. No accent. He definitely wasn't a blalah. Probably he couldn't even speak the pidgin. He wouldn't know da kine from da kine. He was a moke.

I looked around. I was the only white person present. Most of the crew was oriental, though two of the busboys were African and Marcel was Hawaiian.

Marcel came down the line slowly. He stopped in front of Yvonne, a Masai Vested standing next to me. Her ebony skin gleamed under the fluorescent lights of the kitchen. Marcel studied her carefully. He seemed to take an extra bit of time with everyone tonight to be certain they were immaculate.

Paranoia struck me again. Was Marcel a holoactor or an alter? Would he be able to tell that the real Willie Beeman was jacked into the HoloNets, semi-comatose, visualizing all of this through me? Or, a sudden thought struck me, was I dreaming him? I almost fell over thinking about all the paradoxes with Willie's real life unfolding on a Clan's private HoloNet. I managed to ignore the question of the dreamer or the dream—it was better suited to theologians and philosophers than private investigators anyway—and concentrate on where I was. All I needed to know was that a blonde out there could help me.

I quickly tightened my washboard belly muscles to mask my unease as Marcel slowly and carefully checked my physique. The veins in my arms and legs throbbed.

Marcel started suddenly, then controlled himself and drew back. Slowly and gently, with the kindness of a cobra mesmerizing its victim before it strikes, Marcel stood straight and looked me in the eye. That little voice was telling me he knew and I prepared to bolt.

He said, "Mr. Beeman, your body is well muscled and your veins etch your skin in a provocative pattern."

Relief. He didn't know. Then, maybe I wouldn't know if he knew.

Marcel reached out as if to trace the veins of my right arm and I almost leapt back in revulsion. In the real world, it was part of the rules of the Skyview that Marcel never touched any of the waitrons without permission. But I was not at all certain how far Marcel would go on this Net. I was sweating now and the drops of perspiration beaded up on my oiled physique. Marcel smiled wickedly out of the corner of his mouth and stopped just short of the hair on my forearm.

"Mr. Beeman, you had better be more careful. Hit the gym tomorrow. You're losing a little tone."

Quickly I stood on my hands and did twenty pushups—hard enough to do on Earth, but on L-1 a pushup required precise control in the lesser gravity or I would fly into the air and land badly.

Marcel wasn't impressed. "Everyone, take your stations," was all he said, dismissing us.

Two of the waiters, twins from Osaka, winked at me. One of them said, "Better be careful or Marcel will invite you to his room to see your etchings." He and his brother laughed and I flushed angrily.

"I thought I was going to have to hit him or something to make him back off," I grated. "That pig wouldn't last a minute in the Cincy/Pitts Corridor. He'd be killed just for his excess water alone. What a moke."

The second twin looked at me sideways and then punched me playfully in the arm. "Willie, you'd better ease up on the Nets. Next thing you know, you'll think you really are a private dick or something." The two brothers laughed and went off to their stations.

The twin's remark sobered me quickly. In the real world, Willie Beeman was a good-natured Hilljack with a great looking physique. He had ten years tops before he faded into obscurity and returned to the Corridors from where he came, old and used up at thirty-two. On this private Net a holofigure represented him as the dim-witted beefcake he was. I had to act the

part if I didn't want to blow my cover.

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I moved quickly to my first table—Free Traders just in from a deep space voyage, out six years with Earth passengers and cargo and six years back with aliens and hard to find isotopes for fusion reactors.

I took the Free Traders' orders and keyed them with a menu chip into the comcorder at their table. In the kitchen the head chef, Jim, would read the orders on a huge screen above the grills and ovens. He was the only worker in the Skyview Lounge who did not have a synthchip in his head. He thought of himself as an artist, and Skyview's management put up with his fear of electromagnetic petards shunting through his brain.

While I waited for Jim to acknowledge the order, I wondered what I should do next. Quite possibly Marcia could walk into the dining room and just as possibly she could be jacking out of this Net. I needed information, and I knew suddenly that meant I had to try my long shot—Sevros. I would have to rid myself of this waiter schtick soon.

A dull ping sounded inside my ear. Jim had received the order, and I moved quickly to Willie's next table, greeting four Japanese tourists.

"Kombonwa." Good evening, I said, accessing the Net's Japanese language database. The four men buried their faces in their menus and ignored my Japanese. Toyos spoke only System English to outsiders, when they spoke at all. I inserted the menu chip into the comcorder at their table and waited to key in the orders, but they did not say anything.

I coughed politely and asked, "Sumimasen. Ano, nani ga i desuka?" Excuse me. What would you like?

The Toyos talked among themselves but continued to ignore me. The tough-looking guy across the table from me was familiar. I had seen him before.

"Gomen nasai. Chumon shimasuka?" I'm sorry. What will you order? I asked him very politely, hoping he would look up so I could see him clearly. They all continued to hide behind their menus.

I don't like being ignored, especially when I'm doing my best to be polite. I thought about taking the hand of the Japanese man nearest me and bending his fingers back until he looked directly up at me. Then he dropped his menu and did look at me. His eyes went round and I had his attention or I should say he had mine. The slanting, cobalt blue eye of a dragon peered at me from the nape of the Toyo's neck. That little voice in the back of my mind was howling at me: "You've made a big mistake!" I had seen this moke before from the business end of a laser pistol.

I acted like nothing was unusual. "What would you like to order?" I repeated in English, trying to cover my surprise. He didn't answer, but reached inside his suit coat. I was certain he wasn't going to hand me his Nippon Express Card, and I wondered if I could cover the distance to the kitchen before he fired.

The big Japanese then lowered his menu. Blue-red dragons spilled above his shirt collar, turning darker as he grunted in astonishment. He reacted swiftly for a big man and reached across the table before I could move, grabbing my forearm. He turned the wrist and deftly applied a joint lock, which doubled me over painfully and brought me hopping over to his side of the table. The little one hissed in perfect System English, "It's the intruder."

The two other Toyos remained impassive as though the little guy had just pointed out a speck of dust to them. Holofigures.

The big Japanese smiled, showing his bad teeth. He clamped down harder, but I stood up suddenly. Flexing my body, I pushed him backwards in his chair. In the low gravity of the Hub, the Toyo tipped over slowly. He hung onto my forearm with one hand while his other arm windmilled furiously to keep his balance. His Earth reflexes betrayed him in the two-thirds gravity, and he only succeeded in pulling me over with him. I jumped on him, driving both knees into his solar plexus. Can't say that it bothered me when he squealed like a pig in slaughterhouse and let go. I pushed off easily and turned for the exit.

By now the little Toyo had a laser pistol out of its holster. He caught me dead in his sights.

I stopped and faced him, raising my hands as I did. The Toyo took deliberate aim at my chest. I winced. *This is going to hurt*, I thought. My skin tingled and I could feel the burn even before he pulled the trigger. At the same time, a part of me was detached enough to wonder if Willie Beeman had returned from whatever state, comatose or confusion, he had been visiting and had the presence of mind to disconnect and save his brain.

A sudden blast by my left ear and I ducked instinctively, watching in stunned fascination as the laser pistol exploded from the Toyo's hand. Blood splattered in a slow moving rain across the white linen tablecloth. The Toyo lurched into the table, overturning it onto the laps of the other two Japanese. They all toppled to the floor in slow motion, like the Titanic upending into the North Atlantic.

Bells tolled in my left ear from the gun blast, and I could barely hear above their roar. A voice whispered in my right ear, "My employer wants a word with you." A hand grabbed me by the loincloth and yanked me to my feet. Before I could protest, I was dragged through the kitchen and then we were both running onto the main thoroughfare of the hub. It's amazing how a path appears in a crowd when a man waving a gun runs through it towing a mostly naked man by his loincloth.

We ducked into a small shrine to the Church of God's Divine Bodily Functions—one of those new religions that pops up on the 'Nets, lasts a week and then dies out, mostly from boredom with only a few diehards chanting its praises. Pilgrims were lined up in a bizarre array of costumes to receive communion from a priest wearing only an enormous erection and giving a whole new meaning to the word transubstantiation. We skirted the defrocked priest and the altar and ran through a small opening at the back of the chancel like camels through the Eye of the Needle. It would have been easier had we been slightly greased; I left some skin on the doorjamb.

After that, in rapid succession came twists and turns, startled tourists and upset coffee carts. I barely had time to wonder where L-1's security was. Even on a private HoloNet they should have some kind of presence, but I hadn't heard or seen them since this wild ride started. We jumped several levels by riding a gondola that provided a breathtaking view of L-1's recreation of Victoria Falls complete with a hologram of Sir Richard Francis Burton, sporting great black mustachios, recounting his search for the headwaters of the Nile.

We exited the gondola in the lower levels of L-1 near the Hub's docking ring. Seconds later we were through a pressurized airlock and into a shuttlecraft. My rescuer threw a switch, which demagnetized the latching hooks. We floated free. He eased the port-side throttles forward and we rolled right, away from the Hub. Within seconds, we were arcing toward the plush suites on the Gold Coast side of L-1, 180 degrees opposite of Freeport.

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My rescuer needed a good tailor. He was dressed in a cheap gray suit and narrow black tie that made his pallid, flat-nosed face look like the south end of a donkey headed north. His hair was cut short and he wore an oversized fedora, which gave his head the impression of a seed rattling around in a gourd. I had a good idea his brain matched the metaphor. He looked like a character out of a cheap novel, which was how this Saturday night was shaping up.

He was an alter; I was sure of it. Not intuition. The skull and crossbones tattooed on both ear lobes and the silver jack implanted behind his left ear told me he was a cyberdog. Cyberdogs played the HoloNets for profit; not true gamesters who pitted themselves against experienced players for the sake of the game, they were mokes who preyed on the newbies. He held the pistol, an old style, single action .38, in his right hand, while he guided the shuttle with his left. He looked like he wasn't going to let go of the pistol any time soon, either.

"Thanks . . . " I hesitated, waiting for him to fill the vacuum with his name.

"Wilmer," he said.

"Thanks for the help, Wilmer. Now turn this shuttle back toward the Hub. I've got some unfinished business back there with a blonde and some Toyos."

I reached for the controls in the co-pilot's chair and he rapped my fingers hard with the butt end of the .38, motioning me to sit back away from the controls.

Pain throbbed up my arm and unsettled me. I was still unused to it. I rubbed my hand and sat quietly in one of the passenger seats.

"So, who are you taking me to?"

"Kefe," he said. "You think I'm some kinda moke. My boss wants to talk to you. Is all."

He shut up then and didn't say anything for the remainder of the fifteen-minute ride.

I settled back and enjoyed the view.

L-1 is like any Twenty-first Century Earthside city. On one arc is Freeport, where the workers and a few middle class traders live, restaurants and taprooms that are dives with nothing more than a few tables and chairs in unadorned shells of tungsten and steel. The rich people live on the Gold Coast part of the ring, angled so they have a permanent view of the Milky Way without Earth getting in the way. Like the suburbs, the farther out you are, the richer you are. Connecting it all through the center lies the Hub, where the best restaurants and casinos are located. The Skyview Lounge occupies the highest level. As far as I'm concerned, the fat cats can have their view of the stars. I never tire of looking at Earth—10,000 murders a day and covered with lowlifes like maggots on a corpse. My kind of planet.

We came to the outermost part of the ring, where only members from the wealthiest Clans lived. Wilmer docked with a soundless jolting at a section, which bulged outward from the rest of the station like a bunion. I was shocked by the view. The architecture was a Grafartist's fantasy of Camelot—spiraling towers and arches of glittering metal, that would twist and break apart under the stress of Earth's gravity, and topped by crenelated turrets from a giant's Lego set. The castle loomed over us, a gleaming black and white specter out of Orson Welles' Citizen Kane, and I swallowed hard, wondering if the owner was going to whisper, "Rosebud," in my ear before he ordered his gunsel to whack me.

Wilmer pointed the .38 at me and indicated I was to go first into the airlock. I obliged him, and when he turned to dog the hatch, I whirled, pulled his coat down around his elbows and disarmed him. If you think this is easy in one-sixth G, then try repeating the maneuver in the deep end of a swimming pool and tugging the top down on your ex-wife's bathing suit.

I pushed Wilmer away, and he half floated and stumbled into the other side of the airlock.

"Go on, knock politely, Wilmer. We shan't be late," I said.

He pulled his suit coat back up, and looking like the cat who lost the mouse, cycled the airlock and went inside.

Except for the small cone of light from the airlock, the place was dark. A faint odor of anisette and cigars filled the air. I pushed Wilmer and he stumbled forward into the shadows. A soft chuckle came out of the darkness from the far side. Then a dim light came on, illuminating a corner of the chamber. Cigar smoke feathered the gloom. I was standing in a tall room, ornate with Egyptian motif. Dark wood and rich kilims covered the walls. Thick, brightly colored oriental rugs, their sides overlapping, carpeted the steel floor and tickled the soles of my bare feet. The room seemed to extend past the light, but darkness swallowed it up.

Fifteen feet in front of me, an enormous man sat in an overstuffed chair, rolls of fat piling up against the richly brocaded wings. A pendulous dewlap lay upon his chest and his eyes were sunk so deeply in layers of fat that they appeared to be points of light peering out of twin tunnels. His bald, white head was ringed by tufts of gray hair.

He was dressed in a simple kilt and he held a burning cigar in the thick fingers of his left hand. He stroked a large Persian cat on his lap. Shelves of dead tree editions filled the walls behind him. Beside him on a small table was a pair of reading glasses and a book, Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*.

I knew then, that he had to be an alter. No Holoactor would take the time to read a book.

"Good Evening, Mr. Drake," the man said in a whispery voice with a slight accent. "We meet at last."

I gave him a Stanley and Livingston. "Mr. Markos, I presume."

He nodded and then smiled gravely at his pet cyberdog. "You see, Wilmer, Mr. Drake is much smarter than you gave him credit for." Wilmer sniffed and looked like he would start whining at any moment.

"Mr. Drake," Sevros continued in that unhurried voice, soft like a butterfly wing. "Would you kindly return Wilmer his pistol. He feels lost without it."

I tsked. "Kids shouldn't play with guns. Someone might get hurt."

"I insist."

"Markos, the way I see it, you're in no position to insist on anything. As a matter of fact, I'm going to insist on a little information before I leave."

Sevros stroked the Persian thoughtfully. After a few seconds he said, "I suppose a trade of information would be in the best interests of everyone. But really, the gun is such an unnecessary provocation."

"Maybe from your end, but I like the view from here, just fine." I settled on the arm of a chair where I could keep Markos and Wilmer covered.

He sighed and shook his head. "I do so dislike having to do things the hard way."

That little voice in the back of my head told me to duck, too late. I felt a sharp pinch on the side of my neck. The room turned fuzzy and I blacked out for the second time.

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Whatever happened to Wil Drake's private investigator's head scrambled Willie's black widow a second time. Already paralyzed from the first blow, all he could do was lie there and endure. Static storms once more filed past his eyes, and each lightning strike spiked a new high

on his pain threshold. Willie couldn't believe that he was still conscious or maybe he was just experiencing what dying felt like. Then a tug by his left ear told him he was still alive, but he was too frozen to do anything about it.

Through the escalating noise and torture behind his eyeballs, Willie heard a voice whisper, "He's stabilized. Better leave him jacked in for now until we figure out how to unjam this thing. No telling whether forcing the plug loose will fry his brain or not."

Willie tried to speak, scream to them to take the chance and yank the plug out. But his words were lost within a haze of pain and he blacked out.

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A calloused hand gripped my jaw and shook me.

"He's coming around now," a whiny voice said. My eyes fluttered open. Wilmer let go of me and slapped me on the cheek.

The lights were all blurry and then they came into focus. Sevros was sitting in his chair stroking the Persian. Cyberdog was standing over me like a pointer, holding the .38.

My head felt like the inside of a cement truck. I groaned mostly because I was still trapped in this private HoloNet's version of a "B" movie. Guess I was lucky it wasn't Alien.

Sevros chuckled. "Welcome back to the land of the living, Mr. Drake."

"If you call this living." I rubbed my eyes and the kaleidoscope of colors made my head ache.

"You'll probably want something for that headache."

"A bag of ice and some Scotch would help."

Sevros nodded to Wilmer, who went to a side bar near the overstuffed chair. Sevros had to raise his voice above the hum of the autobar making ice.

"Allow me to introduce my other associate, the Asp."

A small man in a nondescript, dark suit stepped out of the shadows behind me. He carried a black bowler hat in both hands. His eyes were mere slits and his ears were small and pointed like an elf's. I had the feeling that I had seen him somewhere before but I couldn't place his comic strip mug for certain. I was sure he didn't belong on this HoloNet, though quite honestly I wouldn't have been more surprised if a White Rabbit in a checkered weskit with a pocket watch had hopped through the room.

I looked at my chrono and groaned. Like the White Rabbit, I could feel time slipping away. Saturday night was coming to an end and demolition with it. I was no nearer any answers than when I started. All I had was a hunch that someone was manipulating Continuity, rearranging all of the HoloNets to fit his own whims. I was a pawn in Wonderland.

Wilmer returned with a small ice bag and a brandy. He handed the brandy to Sevros and tossed me the ice bag. Sevros took a sip and stroked the cat. Then he pressed a stud on his wrist pad and more lights came up in the rest of the room. The room seemed to expand back quite a ways. Hallways, promising even more riches in unoccupied space, extended from it. A cave of wonders. At the far end, I could see through a door to a large kitchen, all tile and stainless steel. From where I stood, most of the room was filled with beveled glass cabinets filled with Middle Eastern curios. A sarcophagus with the falcon head of the Egyptian God, Horus, stood upright in one corner. On a pedestal by an ancient roll top desk sat a miniature ivory carving of the Sphinx. I wondered whether I would be allowed to leave, if I answered the riddles in this room.

"Mr. Drake, let me be honest," Sevros began. Then he chuckled and took another sip. "No

that's asking too much. But let me say that I could simply kill you, but that would be wasteful. I am looking for an item, and I have reason to believe that you can help me find it."

I put the ice bag aside and went over to the side bar to pour myself a Scotch. I needed to give myself some time to think. My host was an alter ego for certain, which meant that the real Sevros Markos was jacked into the circuit at his private residence on L-1. He also wasn't the Fat Man since his gunsel had saved me from the Toy boys. But he acted very self-confidant, and that made me wonder if he was the one messing with Continuity and manipulating the Nets.

I didn't ask him that. I downed the booze and said, "I'm looking for something myself," and stopped before I mentioned the package. Not out of client loyalty but because of the Scotch. I realized I was experiencing its flavor for the first time. It was 60 proof, 50 years old and as mellow as a nun in church; its aftertaste remained on my tongue like ambrosia. The experience captivated my attention. I poured myself another and sipped this one slowly, wondering at the intensity of the sensory experience.

"I'll be blunt," Sevros said, interpreting my silence as his cue to continue. "I want the package. It's worth a lot of money to me."

"What's in it?" I asked. Not the best question to ask when you're negotiating for your life, but the Scotch had thrown me off my game.

His eyes narrowed and nearly disappeared in his face. "You don't know?" Sevros seemed a bit agitated. "I had assumed you were told about the item." He heaved himself up from the chair like a whale surfacing and proceeded to pace ponderously, in spite of the one-sixth gravity, across the rugs. The silence grew while Sevros appeared to be considering his options.

"My client paid me a lot of money and told me to bring him a box," I said, filling the gap. "I don't even know what the box looks like."

Like a man who's come to a decision, and I hoped it was the right one for me, Sevros stopped pacing. He motioned to the Asp who went to the desk at the far side of the room near the door to the kitchen. The Asp opened a drawer and pulled out an elaborately decorated cedar chest, a little larger than a jewelry box. He carried it carefully, as if it might explode, across the plush carpeted room and handed it to Sevros. The chest was a Chinese puzzle box and I could see no seams. Sevros turned it over. "This box is the companion to the one your client hired you to find." He pressed an edge and the top slid back. He showed it to me. "As you can see this one is empty."

"Illuminating," I said. "But it still doesn't tell me what's in the other box."

"What do you know about Ernest Hemingway?"

It took less than a second to search the answer.

"Author, twentieth century. Some fame while he lived, but his reputation soared after he committed suicide."

"For him, a good career move. For you . . ." Sevros let the silence hang for a minute. Then, "I'll pay you ten times whatever your client has offered you for the item in the other box."

I hid my shock. I'm reasonably honest, more so than most private eyes. Twice my client's fee would have been enough to make me seriously consider switching employers. But ten times was alarming. It meant my existence on this Net wasn't worth a single credit if I didn't accept Sevros' offer. At the same time I wondered where Marcia fell into all of this.

"You can have the woman," he said, as if reading my thoughts. "Just bring me the item."

"And that would be?

"The Maltese . . . " His words were cut off as a laser beam split his skull and continued down to his crotch. He literally fell apart at the seams.

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When a laser cleaves a man on the brink of answering one of life's little mysteries, you don't turn and say thank you. Being an alter ego has a great advantage. Thought becomes action.

I cartwheeled over Sevros' dead body, grabbing his wrist pad as I flew by. I rolled away and pressed several of the studs, rendering the room dark.

Wilmer fired once wildly. The sound was deafening. I cringed, wondering which was worse, the ricochet or that he might vent a hole into space. The gun banged twice more, the muzzle flash illuminating Wilmer's hand sticking around the side of Sevros' chair. The laser sliced through the armrest and Wilmer screamed.

Two down, two to go, I thought, hoping I would be the last man standing.

A whistling like a boomerang carved the air above me. I heard a sound of cloth on metal and the laser died out.

Just me and the Asp left. I decided to shift positions. I sprang across the room toward the airlock and slammed up against the access panel. The door began cycling open and the light from the tube slashed into the room. Instinctively I reached for my laser pistol but in the excitement I forgot I was wearing only a loincloth. It looked like the Asp was going to take the title.

The airlock door swung open with a hiss of air and I crouched, a deer in the headlights.

Nothing happened.

The Asp had vanished. So had the laser wielding assassin. Jacked out most likely. I wished I could do the same.

In the light spilling from the airlock, I could see Sevros in the middle of the room, sliced in half, his flesh still smoldering. Blood covered the thick Oriental rug. He had evacuated himself and the stench was awful.

The sight and smell of Sevros' dead body sobered me considerably. Holo-adventures are supposed to be nothing more than a collection of photons and pixels beamed directly into a webhead's cerebral cortex. Just part of the Gamelan. When an alter ego is killed, the body disappears. The webhead wakes up and is able to reconstruct his alter at a later time. But Sevros lay there dead and stinking and demolished forever like a real person in the real world. I couldn't help but think that most likely his webhead host lay in a Gold coast room, exactly like this one, also dead. After all, I was immersed in a private HoloNet—leagues above the 'Nets for the masses. The ultra rich could afford to play at a level where the stakes were far higher than ephemeral glory. The ultimate gamble would be life and death.

The question still remained, 'What was Wil Drake, a poor Hilljack's alter, doing on this Net?'

I put those thoughts aside and looked at my chrono, 22:05. I had less than two hours till demolition to solve this mystery, if some gunsel didn't kill me before then. I only had one chance left. Find Marcia and the package.

I walked between the mounds of Sevros' body, two large hills of flesh in the center of the room. The cedar box was beside the outstretched fingers of his right hand. I picked it up, fiddled with the edges and pressed a spot. The lid slid shut. I took it with me and entered the shuttle.

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Mulling things over during the ride on the shuttle, I decided to bypass the Hub and go to the airlock nearest Willie's room on the Freeport side.

The holoactor of Willie Beeman was still stretched out on his bunk, the cable from the HoloNet interface like a feeding tube, filling its brain with food for thought. My thoughts? Who could tell? What are an alter's dreams made of? My Saturday night was ending and I didn't have much time to find Marcia and the box, exit this private Net, deliver the item to my client and find someone to disconnect me.

Yes, I said deliver the item to my client. In spite of the bad situation I found myself in personally, I still was a P.I. and I had a case to finish. For that I had to find Marcia but I had no idea where to start looking for her.

Sevros had uttered the word, "Malt," before a laser beam had cut him in twain. Maybe some association with that word would help. I checked the web's library and came up with several references, only a couple struck my interest.

Malta remained an independent island country in the Mediterranean, south of Sicily. Population 750,000. A lot of people on a small rock. It had been home to the Knights of Malta, the supposed defenders of the Holy Grail.

Malta was also a small breed of dog, having long, silky white hair. Dogs had also once been wieners sold at baseball games. It could also be a cat. Place the two animals side by side and you would see immediately why dogs were from Mars and cats were from Venus. About the only thing they had in common, besides being soft and furry, was that ranchers raised them like cattle used to be.

This line of thought was taking me nowhere fast and I was running out of ideas and time.

My wristpad beeped. I pressed a stud and saw Enobarus on the pad's tiny screen. "Da wahine, she be here, is all," he said.

"I'll be right there."

I dressed quickly in the double-breasted. My laser pistol slid easily into my shoulder holster. I ran my fingers in my hair a few times and I checked myself out in the mirror. I was hot.

It was 22:30 before I entered the bar. The lights were dimmer than before. One of the Alphans I had seen earlier was at the synthesizer, pounding out arhythmic melodies. Enobarus was at the bar. He had activated the joy juice machine behind him to handle the simpler drinks.

I caught one of his eyes and he angled it to the left. I saw her instantly. She was seated in a corner of the room, half concealed by a column, where the light was dim. She had her back to the wall. On the table in front of her was a box that looked identical to the one I carried beneath my suit coat.

Marcia had blonde hair cascading to her waist, leaf green eyes in a heart-shaped face, and lips that could suck the chrome off a trailer hitch. She wore a diaphanous dress over dance tights that showed her muscles were in all the right places. She sipped at a martini and studied the room without appearing to. I whistled tonelessly. Charmed and dangerous. Marcia wasn't one of your holoactors but the MacGregor—an alter like I am. I wondered if her host was as smart as she looked.

I walked over to her table and she looked up and smiled. I was reminded of a cat just before it pounces.

"You're hard to find," she said.

"I could turn that around," I answered, pulling a chair up. I sat facing her. I stretched out my hands and saw her tense slightly, but I reached past the box, taking the fingers of her left hand in mine. She relaxed.

"I missed you at Sloppy Joes," I said.

"It wasn't safe there."

"It isn't safe here." I wasn't going to tell her all I'd been through. So far every alter on this Net had been a step ahead of me, and I was certain that Marcia had a fair idea of what had happened so far. All I wanted was the box and a way off this channel.

"Then why are you sitting with your back to the door?" Her voice sounded amused but her eyes were as hard as plassilver and just as expensive.

I smiled, let go of her hand and sat back in my seat. "Because, they don't want me; they want what's in the box."

Her lips formed the question, "They?" but the word never came out. Two men emerged from the shadows beside us. It was the Toyos. The little one's right hand was bandaged, but he carried a laser pistol in his left.

"Quite right, Mr. Drake," he said. "We do want what's in the box. But I'm sure our employer would not mind having you and the young lady as a bonus."

They motioned us toward a door within those shadows. I tried to catch Enobarus's eye but he had his back turned and then we were out of the bar and in a back room of the Skyview Lounge. Moments later, the box was on a desk and Marcia and I were seated in two chairs in front of it. The Toyos had removed my laser pistol and wrist pad. A chrono on the wall said fifty-five minutes to midnight. Fifty-five minutes until demolition and not a whole lot of options.

The little Toyo was having a private conversation with his wrist pad. He pushed a stud and turned toward us. "The Fat Man will be here soon."

Needing some answers, I said, "While we're waiting, let's see what's in the box."

"Not until the Fat Man arrives."

"You don't have to open it. Just ask Marcia. After all, she's his number one, isn't she?" The big one turned red in the face and his dragons glared at me. I knew I'd scored a direct hit.

"Was," the little Toyo grated. "She won't be anyone's number one once the Fat Man finishes with her."

His dialogue was still horrible. "You guys need somebody to punch up your lines," I said.

"Shut up," the big one growled. I opened my mouth but the little one waved his pistol at me and I closed it without a word.

I wasn't going to get any more answers from those two. Meanwhile, Marcia sat as cool and voiceless as an alabaster statue. The case was running on fumes. As far as I could figure, Marcia had double-crossed her boss for whatever was in that box and was now dragging me down with her.

You can become deeply introspective, waiting for a man to arrive to kill you, or you can spend your last minutes finding a way out of the mess you got yourself into. I've heard that every trap and every hopeless situation has a solution if a man is clever enough and determined enough to find it. Only no brilliant ideas of escape floated out of the mists of my Cyberspace generated cerebral cortex. It didn't look as though the Greek God in charge of Private Eyes would suddenly descend to save my ass and resolve the plot, either. Introspection was looking more and more like the only course of action as time slipped away actually and metaphorically. I grappled with Willie's and my impending demolition.

I know what you're thinking. Alter egos aren't supposed to contemplate human

philosophical conundrums of life and death. We're nothing more than psychic recreation—a chance for webheads to achieve a moment's glory unavailable in their drab lives. Extensions of their minds, we shuffle off this cyber coil nightly and are resurrected when next our host jacks in. No big deal.

But it was a big deal as far as I was concerned. Over the course of the evening's adventures, I realized that the Wil Drake on this private Net was no longer merely neuronal activity inside somebody's head. I felt more alive at this moment than at any time in my year long existence. It was as though I had woken up, or more precisely, had separated myself from Willie's mundane life as a waiter. The way I scanned it, I was no longer just an extension of Willie Beeman. I had achieved a separate reality. I deserved the rewards that come with self-awareness. And now, among the rewards was a feeling of real fear. When the Fat Man walked through that door, I would be gone forever and dammit, I wasn't ready to die just yet.

This last thought gave me an idea. Maybe, there was a way out of this trap, after all. If our captors could feel the same as I did, perhaps they would see the futility of living as extensions of their hosts. I looked at the two Toyos, standing on the other side of the desk as unconcerned as manikins and my hopes fell. They were clearly into their gig as Toyo Clan alters, projections of their hosts' minds. They weren't about to listen to me. Next to me, Marcia remained as self-possessed as a piece of granite. I wasn't going to have any luck arguing the cliché of humanity's free will with her either. Like Atlas, I shrugged. So much for introspection and escape plans.

The door opened. The slim glimmer of hope that it would be Enobarus ended as a small man with elf ears and wearing a black bowler hat walked in covering all of us with a laser pistol. The Asp. The Toyos dropped their weapons and scurried behind us. Sevros Markos waddled in. Marcia gasped, then controlled herself.

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Sevros stood in the doorway, his grotesque paunch sucking in the room's space like a black hole. He saw the look on my face and he had the answer even before I asked the question.

"Let me assure you, Mr. Drake, and you too, Marcia, I am the real thing. The Sevros Markos you saw split in half was another alter playing me. Pretty useful deception, wouldn't you say?" he finished, staring at Marcia.

I had to agree, it had fooled me. I noted it had fooled his would-be killer, too, but Marcia had the wits to shut up and stay still, the image of diorite. Good girl, I thought, realizing at the same time that I could fall in love with a killer, especially one as beautiful and dangerous as she was. I kept this last bit to myself and instead I asked, "What about Wilmer?"

"Alas, I'm afraid when poor Wilmer's alter was killed, his host died too. Such are the fortunes of war in Cyberspace. But he had served his purpose."

Sevros smiled and moved clumsily in the two-thirds gravity. The Asp motioned with his pistol and the Toyos scoured the room, finally producing a large chair. All of us watched with equal amounts of fascination and revulsion as Sevros lowered his monstrous girth into it. He looked like a hog being stuffed into a potato sack. It took him a minute to get settled and we all sighed with relief when he was finished.

At last he said, "Now onto our business. You have something I want, I believe."

I pointed to the box on the table between us. "It's right there."

"I meant the box you took from my room."

I sighed and took the other box from my suit coat pocket, then pushed it along side the

other one.

Sevros had a look on his face like a kid in a candy store. One by one he gathered the boxes to him. He pressed the side of my box first and the top slid back. It was empty. He looked at me with a sad smile.

"You disappoint me, Mr. Drake. I had heard of your ability with sleight of hand, and I wagered with the Asp that you had already switched the boxes."

I smiled. "Disappointment happens."

Sevros set the box aside and fingered the edge of the second one. The top slid back, revealing the item that had been chased after from New York to L-1, and for which one person had already been killed. Resting inside the box was a tiny, black figurine of Horus. Sevros sucked in air like a Japanese tourist. He lifted the Falcon God gingerly and held it as a man would hold his own baby. "I've waited seventeen years for this moment," he said.

I blinked and then cleared my throat. "All this brouhaha over a doll?" I said, dumbfounded.

Sevros chuckled. "Not a doll, Mr. Drake, but the Maltese Falcon, from the Bogart movie of the same name. But the doll is insignifcant." He smashed the figurine's head against the table and it shattered. He reached inside the bird and pulled out a small manuscript. "Now this is invaluable. What you see is the lost Hemingway."

"And you're going to tell us what that is."

He smiled. "Why not. In the 1930's, Ernest Hemingway's first wife boarded a train. In her luggage was Hemingway's second novel. The luggage was lost or stolen and the novel never recovered. But somebody, perhaps the thief or his grandchild, scanned it into cyberspace, where it stayed, still lost, until now. It is a priceless piece of work. But more important than its worth is that it is now mine."

"Not for long!" a voice boomed from the door.

Marcel stood there in his emerald green tuxedo like an enormous leprechaun. He held a laser pistol in his right hand and with his left he motioned to the Asp to drop his weapon. The Asp reacted like Bruce Willis and ended up on the floor with a smoking pinhole in his third eye.

The Toy boys picked up their hardware and went over to stand beside Marcel.

"So you're the Fat Man," I said. "I should have guessed."

"At your service, Willie." He smiled slyly at me.

Marcel moved toward the table. "I'll take the item!" he barked.

Sevros' jowls quivered like Jell-O. "You can't have it," he squealed. "It's mine."

Marcel shrugged. "You can hold on to it until you die, or you can hand it over to me and live," he said.

I winced at his words and vowed to myself that if I ever ran across the people who were running this Holo-script, I'd trade them in for a dog and then shoot the dog.

Slowly, I reached across the table and took the manuscript from Sevros. He resisted. "It's over," I said gently.

Trembling, he let go with a sad little sigh that seemed to puff the life out of him. I suppose Sevros' loss was a lesson that you can put too much emphasis on material goods. On the other hand, in virtual reality, what else is there. It's not like the man with most toys doesn't win. This revelation didn't stop me from playing it smart, though. I put the manuscript into one of the cedar chests, closed it and shoved it across the table.

Marcel picked up the box and smiled at us. His pistol never wavered and for a minute I thought he was going to slice us all. Instead, he came over and stood next to me, running his Twinkie sized fingers over the folds of my suit.

"You have such wonderful definition, Willie . . . or should I say, Mr. Drake. It would be a crime against the world of art to kill you." He shot me a look and I realized that Marcel had known all along who I really was.

"Just tell me one thing, Marcel," I said. "You're the one who's been manipulating the Nets, right?"

He tried to hold his face impassive, but behind his eyes was a look of genuine surprise. He didn't know any more about what was going on than I did.

He answered, "I think I'll let you stay in ignorance."

He turned slowly toward Marcia. "As for you."

Without warning, Marcel slapped her savagely across the cheek, leaving a scarlet weal on her milky skin. Her head moved just a fraction and she didn't make a sound. I wondered if he hurt his fingers on her stony features.

"Don't ever cross my path again," he warned her.

Then he and the Toyos left, mercifully without saying another word.

As soon as Marcel had disappeared, Sevros grabbed my coat sleeve and screamed at me, "I'll give you 500,000 credits to get it back!"

I shook him off and stood up. "Not interested."

He pleaded, cajoled, threatened, but in the end, I left him sobbing like a little boy on Christmas day with a broken choo-choo.

At the door I stared back at Marcia.

"You coming?" I asked.

She nodded and we left the room.

At the bar Enobarus was making an Irish coffee. Marcia and I sat across from him. She looked about as glum as an indicted politician. I wasn't feeling so bad, except for the time running out on the clock, but that I couldn't help anymore than I could stop a Senator from lying. I held up two fingers and signaled Enobarus for a pair of scotches, neat.

"Hey, blalah," I said, when he brought them over. "You meet da wahine, Marcia. Marcia, my blalah, Enobarus."

He laid out his hand palm up, the fingers slender and fine boned, each with a long, delicate fingernail hooked like a tiny claw. She laid the back of her hand into his.

"Pleased to meet you, Grrrunhnk," she said, pronouncing his name flawlessly.

His eyes gleamed and he said something to her in Tau Cetan. She answered and I was ignored like last week's protein mash.

I got up to leave and pulled a cedar box from my coat pocket.

Pushing it across the bar to Enobarus, I said, "This should square you and Willie on the rent and the HoloNets." At least in Cyberspace, I thought.

I squeezed the edge and the lid slid back. Inside was the lost Hemingway. Marcia started. "You switched the boxes!" she cried out, her marble poise cracking.

I gave her my best Bogart, "Sweetheart, magic can change your life."

"Kefe!" Enobarus said. "You one good blalah. Is all."

I think he grinned. It's hard to tell.

-13-

I drifted out of the bar toward Willie Beeman's room. My chrono said I had ten minutes until midnight. Not much time left, so I figured I'd watch what happened to the cyberspace Willie in the last seconds of his/my existence. Not that I was ready to read Sartre or Heidegger, it just seemed that there wasn't much point to anything else. I thought that if this private HoloNet mirrored everything in Willie's world on board L-1, it might be interesting to see what happened to his doppelganger at demolition.

I cycled through the hub's airlock to the ring. As I emerged, a fist slammed me in the stomach, doubling me over.

I heard Dix Macon laugh. "That was my left hand, Willie-boy. I've been working out since you last saw me."

Gasping, I thought, *Virtual reality sucks*. I straightened slowly and kept my cool.

"We've got to stop meeting like this, Dix," I smirked. "It's bad for my suits."

He hurled me down the corridor. I spun slowly in one-sixth gee, skipping five times on the carpet like a stone on a lake. I laughed then, thinking it must be some kind of record.

"What's so funny?" Dix asked.

"Compassionate conservatism."

He picked me up and flung me hard to the other side. A potted plant broke my fall. "Don't get smart with me, Willie-boy."

"That would be tough," I conceded.

He came at me again.

"Hold off, Dix. In three more minutes I'm history anyway."

He stood back. Stupid barely covered the look on his face. What a moke. But looking at him standing there, confused as a Girl Scout at a crap game, I remembered that Dix wasn't real. Then I laughed at the irony of an alter ego calling a holoactor unreal.

I quickly sobered and shoved the Joycean surrealism aside. Dix's sudden appearance prompted an idea buzzing in the back of my brain.

"How'd you get in here?" I asked.

"Why?" he asked, on guard.

"Humor me."

He snorted. "As if it matters. When I finish with you, my appearance will be the least of your worries. I followed you into Sloppy Joes but you'd vanished. When I asked Josie where you'd gone, he gave me some cockamamie line about one second you were kissing the carpet like the face on the barroom floor and the next you got all sparkly like and disappeared. I tried to shake the truth out of him, but he wouldn't budge from his story. When I turned around to call for a unit to pick him up, he slugged me on the back of my skull. I woke up here, just before you came in."

The idea thundered in my head. I checked my watch. One minute to go. It was a long shot, but it had been a night of long shots and I was willing to try anything. I got off the floor and went over to Dix.

"Sorry about this Dix, but it can't be helped."

I cuffed him twice across the face. He looked stunned for a second but then he reacted the way I knew he would. He hit me as hard as he could and I smashed against a bulkhead. Everything went dark.

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Waves of static crashed against the bony pier of Willie's skull. Thoughts bobbed like a skiff in a storm and the muscles of his body thrummed like taut hawsers in a hurricane. A far away voice said, "It's almost midnight. We have to jack him out now!"

Numbly Willie agreed.

Two hands held his head while a third clawed at the female receptor behind his left ear. He felt a tugging turn to yanking, and then a twisting pain seared his flesh, followed by what felt like a spike being removed from his neck. The pain subsided abruptly. Willie's eyes opened and he saw Jim the cook and a waiter from the Skyview hovering over him. Jim held the blunt end of a connector in his right hand. It was charred and useless, the way Willie's head felt.

"Thanks," Willie croaked. Then blackness, cool and painless.

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I peeled myself off the floor and shook my head. The static was gone. I felt good, not even a little fuzzy. In fact, I never felt better. My suit looked as though it had been freshly pressed. My hand went behind my left ear. The jack was gone! I mean not even the receptor was there. The skin of my neck was smooth and unblemished. How? I thought and then decided this was one mystery I shouldn't pursue.

Looking around, I recognized the furniture and the decor and the twenty or so life-battered people sitting at tables, and I knew that I was back in Sloppy Joes Bar.

Silence behind me, punctuated by a gasp. I turned and Josie was standing at the bar holding an ancient bottle of Jim Beam '67, not the watered down stuff he peddled to his regulars.

"Drake . . . you . . . and . . ." his words dribbled away harmlessly.

"That's my name," I said as nonchalantly as I could. I gave him my flinty-eyed stare. "You'd better be careful with that bottle. It's worth more than you are."

Josie went white, dropped the whiskey like a hot rock and fled the bar.

I checked my chrono. It was three minutes after midnight. I held my breath and waited.

Nothing.

I experienced none of the tingling that preceded fading away when a host unplugged. Nor anything that might be interpreted as fried gray matter, signaling my ultimate demise.

After a few moments, I relaxed. Apparently I wasn't going anywhere. Demolition had been canceled. The feeling of separation from Willie had vanished too. Yet at the same time I didn't feel him lurking in the background, pulling my strings. I was free at last, to quote an old spiritual.

It occurred to me right then that the only entity capable of all the changes I had experienced was Continuity itself. But then how would I ever know for certain: knock on the door of my skull and shout, 'Hey you! You been responsible for all these changes?' It would be like talking to God; the only answer I would hear was the echo of my own voice. Still it made a kind of naive sense. If you have humans playing in your backyard night after night, maybe you want to know more about them, so you rig up an alter to feel and dream like a human does while you nestle like a parasite in his consciousness, feeding off the experience.

I wasn't going to waste anymore time thinking about why I was standing there, unhurt and whole, or what happened to Willie the waiter on the real L-1. The ways of the world and its philosophical underpinnings do not hold much interest for me. I'm a P. I., and it's enough for me

to know that there are murders to solve and items people have that don't belong to them that others want returned. As far as I was concerned, everything had worked out for the best. And on top of that, it was still Saturday night.

Smiling, I walked out of Sloppy Joes, rode the lift to the ground level and went out to find my Jag. The valet blew off my tip. Back on the strip, the rain made diamonds on my windshield and somewhere ahead in the dim night a mystery waited for me, Wil Drake, P.I.

The End

Mark Reeder kicked around the universe for 36 years before settling in Boulder, Colorado, with his wife, Debbie Kranzler. Along the way he acquired a Masters Degree in History from the University of Cincinnati and several bruises from the College of Hard Knocks. Since then he has learned to hangglide, was the chief writer for the nationally syndicated radio talk show, "Against the Rush," (listened to by tens of people across the country) and worked for Centre Communications as a researcher and script writer. His short stories have appeared on the web at 'Deep Magic', 'Quantum Muse', 'Dark Planet', 'Rocket Stories' and 'Galaxy E-zine'. His first science fiction/fantasy novel, 'A Dark Knight for the King,' written with co-author Ron Meyer, was released by Publish America in 2002 and is available at amazon.com.

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I know all secrets, even my own. When she had picked up that cursed staff, she had known. Fianche forced her back straighter and bottled her sigh. "Holy sight is piercing."

Lis turned her face away, but Fianche knew the girl was once again relieved it wasn't she who qualified for a sainthood, that she was only an *ignate*, and that the dismal, dreary suffering, the intolerable holiness of a saint would never be given to her. Fianche empathized with the girl. The stories of glorious pain *did* sound terrifying. Making her own route to the sainthood was proving to be so much easier.

Lis left to inquire after a place to stay, and Fianche focused on the people of the small square, gliding her fingers along the smooth wood of her staff.

A little boy chased a shrieking girl with a toad. He was only out playing because he had lied to his mother about finishing his chores. There hobbled an old woman on the arm of a young girl, daughter, niece, orphan. Whatever the relation, the woman planned to sell her marriage to the highest bidder. And there strode a man in fine clothes. He disguised himself as a merchant dealing in fine jewelry and dining ware, but really he specialized in the illegal trade of herbal narcotics and bewitched potions.

Fianche started, realization sweeping her mind. He would have a way of relief for her. The heavens above had revealed a way for her to keep her sainthood.

"Oh, Sister." An indistinct blur of drab colors blocked the man's retreat from Fianche's sight. Dismayed, she looked up. A man and woman, similar enough in features to be brother and sister, stood before her.

"Thank the mother we went out tonight," the woman continued. "Just an answer to prayer, you are."

"Blessings indeed," Fianche murmured, smiling demurely. A few people had stopped now to stare at the holy woman.

Tears filled the woman's eyes. "It's the most heart-wrenching thing. Our poor mother left us some years ago, and her only legacy was a jeweled ring she gave to me. And I've gone and lost it! We've turned the house around several times looking for it, but it's not to be seen. Can you tell me where it is?"

Fianche nodded, her face grave. "I can, good lady. But you haven't lost it at all." She indicated her head to the accompanying man. "Your brother's stolen it."

The woman turned away with a moan. The crowd gasped and muttered, pressing in closer, and Fianche fed them their secrets until Lis returned to help her away.

* * *

She had gotten the name of the so-called merchant from her lowly hosts, and later that night she slipped out from the dark house into the darker street. She set off quickly and silently; speed was her ally. She had to take action, before she was found, before she started to show.

The only sound in the night was the tap of her staff on the packed dirt. The staff that went with her everywhere. Fianche wasn't given to fear, but sometimes she stayed awake at night, watching the staff, protecting it from careless fingers that would reach down and grasp it to push it aside or admire it, and know with sudden clarity who she was, what she was. It would tell her secret, like it told her all other secrets, and it would be known she was not a saint, could never be a saint, no matter how she tried to cleanse herself with fire.

But she would give the Sisterhood the staff herself if this baby was born. Then it would make no difference. Mothers were never sainted. There was only one way to stay her imminent

expulsion from the Order.

Fianche slowed, her eyes piercing through the gloom to search the storefronts. A bakery, a winery, and there – dirty windows, a faded sign. Fianche looked in through the windows. The walls were lined by bookshelves crammed with all sorts of random wares. On a glance, the store appeared dark, but Fianche could detect the flickering light of a candle from behind the counter. She tested the door. It was unlocked, so she opened it carefully and stepped in.

There was a faint odor of disintegrating books and rusting metal in the stiff air. Fianche closed the door with enough sound to rouse the person waiting in the shadows.

"I'm sorry," a tired man's voice called out. "We're closed."

Fianche didn't reply but walked forward. There was the sound of bottles being shuffled, and she peered around the counter, looking back into a space shielded from the front of the store.

"Oh," the man said, turning to show her his startled face. His hands were still hidden from Fianche's view, no doubt holding his mysterious wares. He tried to smile.

"A Sister of the Order," he said. "No doubt you are here on some holy mission."

Fianche smiled. "A delicate errand."

There was an obvious clatter, and the merchant turned, his hands empty. "Please."

She leaned forward. "I understand you sell more here than what you display in the shop."

"Oh, I keep a few things in storage, but nothing of any importance or value."

"Please, Verchinn, I know of your illegal trade."

He was taken aback for a moment, but warily he nodded his head.

"You have need of those, Sister?"

"I need a purgatory," she said. "A strong one."

"I would need more information than that to prescribe the right one."

Fianche shook her head firmly. "A girl is under affliction. I need a potion to purge all foreign entities, remove anything not of her own blood."

The merchant nodded. His face was grave, his eyes drifted over her body slowly before he answered, his voice thicker and closed from lack of emotion. "I think my stores can supply you."

He shuffled around in his bottles, elixirs and potions. After a few minutes, he pulled forth a small, square bottle of red glass. He handed it over the counter, and Fianche took it, looking at the faded label. The angular writing was unfamiliar to her.

"From the east," he said. "It's excruciating, but it will cleanse you entirely."

"It will cleanse her," Fianche insisted quietly.

"Of course, Sister."

Fianche paid the man, slipped the bottle into her sleeve, and left the stiffness of the store for the cool fluid darkness of the night.

* * *

It wasn't difficult to pretend to be a saint. Saints weren't much different than ordinary people; they learned special methods of healing, trained themselves in observation, spent their lives in devotion and service to those in need, but these were skills an ordinary person could learn with time and training. But each saint had to possess a special power, something different than the ordinary person. The Sisterhood was welcoming; they allowed each saint to come with her own skill, her own "mark" they called it. They held no expectations for prophecy or healing or manipulation. They did not determine which marks were accepted into the Order. They let the mark speak for the person, showing whether or not the person was truly worthy of the life of

pain and service and holiness that was the life of a saint.

When Fianche learned this, she had been truly blessed. She had arrived at the sanctuary from nowhere, presented herself and undergone the purification rites, then knelt before the Hidden Sisters and told them their darkest secrets, shocked and horrified them all, and they could only nod to each other and hand her the colorful mantle of the Order.

Then it was years of learning, training, and apprenticeship to the older Sisters. They were tedious years, and Fianche was constantly on edge that she would be caught. Surely one of the Sisters, with their "special gifts," would notice her, would pinpoint her failure and let the Hidden Sisters know. But the years continued and no one said anything. She was sent out then to the countryside, her last challenge before her sainting, her last obstacle to immortality.

This brought her to small villages and hamlets, healing those that she could, accepting offerings for the Sisterhood, opening the eyes of the common people to the corruption that was around them. Some Sisters thought Fianche's gift wasn't for the common people, that nothing she revealed to them could improve their lives. The Hidden Sisters had disagreed.

"There is no greater cause than exposing truth," they whispered gravely. "No matter the cost."

Now, the morning after obtaining the illegal elixir, the villagers gathered to her, some just from curiosity, some with petitions and desperate pleas. She tried to help each one in turn, not always succeeding. The common people understood that even saints had limitations.

She was rubbing a salve on a poor man's burned arm when she first heard the whispers.

Murderer, the staff whispered.

Fianche ignored it. She made no attempt to argue or disagree, just refrained from replying in any way whatsoever. As she smoothed the salve, she felt the lump in her sleeve, the small, hard bottle that meant her salvation.

As the man fell back into the crowd, relief and gratitude on his face, a woman stepped forward, wizened with grief lines running all around her face.

"Holiness, help me. My daughter suffers so terribly."

You are a murderer.

Fianche hoped her grimace appeared as empathy for the poor woman. She had had the staff's penetration directed at her before, every day of her life, and sometimes it nearly stole her sanity.

"Some say it's demons, some say it's a fever, but she has terrible fits."

You are a murderer!

Enough! Fianche screamed in her mind, desperately hoping to fight back. *I am no murderer.*

You have killed.

"Bring the girl before me." Fianche felt her voice in her chest, unconscious of her decision to speak.

The poison lies untouched in my pocket, Fianche argued. *I have not used it; I have caused no ill, murdered no one.*

She would have. She almost did the other night. She had held it in her hand, turning it over and staring at the ruby liquid, wondering how it tasted, wondering how it worked, if it would hurt. Then Lis had entered the room, and Fianche had slid it back up her sleeve.

You are a murderer.

Fianche released the staff. Only echoes remained. The crowd gazed up at her in awe. Face burning, Fianche looked down at her hands. The knuckles were white. Her gaze drifted, and she

could see how her stomach tightened and bulged.

She looked up at sounds of a struggle. The woman and her son brought forth the troubled girl. She was no more than ten, and her image sparked pity. Her eyes rolled, her hair was disheveled and uneven, tangled, and she was dirty with mud and grease. Spittle hung at the corner of her mouth.

The staff lay beside her, resting where she had dropped it. She would have to touch it if she were to find the nature of the girl's condition. Fianche remained frozen like a stone, gazing at the girl. If she picked up that staff, she knew what she would hear.

The townspeople looked at her expectantly. The mother started to weep.

Fianche's hand drifted to the staff, and she closed her eyes as her fingers brushed it.

MURDERER!

No!

You have killed in your heart. In your heart she lies dead. In your heart you have destroyed her.

Fianche opened her eyes, staring at the tortured girl. She shook her head.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, her voice hoarse. "Your daughter's condition is a result of your sin."

Fianche was only slightly aware of the girl's glazed shock, the brother's anger, the townspeoples' surprise, the mother's weeping. They were all dim to her.

You have killed in your heart.

* * *

Fianche retired for an early evening walk. Her hosts and Lis took it as a walk of solitude to recollect herself. She walked for some way, following a faint hunter's path. Soon after leaving sight of the village, she stepped off the path and gingerly picked her way through the berry bushes, gauging the time she had by the position of the sun. When she knew she could go no farther without having to walk back in the dark, she stopped, laid aside her staff, and knelt down on the ground. It was uneven, and sticks jabbed into her legs. A berry bush swung in the breeze, the thorns dangling dangerously close to her face.

Fianche withdrew the small vial from her pocket. She lifted it to the sun, trying to see the liquid.

There was a peaceful quiet in her mind with the staff lying on the ground next to her. She waited in it, savoring each minute of silence. Until now, there had been only accusations from the staff. If it had a personality of its own she might have thought it was trying to guilt her.

Once she actually drank the liquid, though, it would no longer be just an accusation it spoke.

Fianche uncorked the vial. The breeze brought a strong smell of bleach to her nose. There was another faint smell, a smell that brought a taste to her mouth. Blood.

Suddenly she could feel the pain, the fire spreading through her arteries, consuming, devouring, destroying. She could imagine the horrific purging, wondered if her scream would be heard in the village.

She wondered what the baby would look like afterwards. She wondered what she herself would look like afterwards.

She willed away the pictures and sounds filling her head. She reminded herself of the sainthood. She had toiled so long and was so close to achieving. Her gaze fell to her staff, the

symbol of holiness and fraudulence. She couldn't imagine, a cold circlet around her forehead, the voice that had sainted her making her temples pound with constant, unceasing condemnation of her saint's crown as the murderer's red head sash, her hand an unsheathed dagger, her mind a poison well of corrupted thoughts. Temples aching with voices and tight metal, over and over again until she'd gone mad and belligerent, casting away her sainthood while clinging to her staff.

Fianche moaned. It seemed unbearable, this way she had chosen.

But there would be no sainthood at all if the baby was born alive.

Long after the sun had gone down and there was no more light to see by, Fianche still stared at the bottle.

* * *

It poured. The skies rumbled, and lightning forked on the horizon while rain sheeted down with a rhythmic intensity. A lone figure ran down the mud street, not attempting to gain any shelter from the storm.

Traveling as a beggar had much less fortune than traveling as a saint elect. All men were beggars to saints. To one in need, all men were anything but saints. There had been precious few options, though, and Fianche's decision was months past.

She stopped at a door that was sunken into the wall, a small, handmade overhang protecting the threshold from the brunt of the storm, and carelessly dumped her package onto the threshold. For the first time in days, she allowed herself a direct glance at the baby's face.

"If I do one saintly thing in my life," she said over the sound of the pounding rain, "this will be it." Fianche stared at the child, pink and ugly. "I do not wish you life, but I will not give you death."

She turned and continued running through the storm.

* * *

When she returned to the Sisters' sanctuary, there were very few questions asked. She'd had to enter the inner sanctum and answer to the Hidden Sisters for her unauthorized absence, but their questions were answered by a simple statement that she had needed time for personal prayer and meditation.

Fianche had found Lis in one of the prayer cells, lighting a candle for her. Lis hadn't asked more questions than any of the others, but Fianche could see the curiosity in her eyes. It wasn't until Fianche had undergone purification and they were setting their feet on the worn, packed dirt road that lead from the sanctuary to continue their pilgrimage that she replied to all Lis's unspoken questions.

"You're wondering what happened to the child," Fianche said with a smile.

Lis shifted her pack uncomfortably. "I wouldn't want to pry, holiness."

"With you it isn't prying, Lis," Fianche answered gently. "You have a right to know, especially considering you never once mentioned the transgression to the Hidden Sisters."

"Of course not, holiness."

Fianche nodded, taking a moment. "After I left for prayer and meditation on how to pursue sainting with a child near, I spent several weeks wandering the surrounding villages and countryside. Just as I was despairing of any answer, a bittersweet way was given to me. I went

into labor too early, and despite the best efforts of a village midwife, the child was stillborn."

Horror and relief were clearly written on Lis's face. "What a way that was given out."

"Yes," Fianche murmured. "It was terrible. I spent days mourning the child before giving it a proper burial. By then I could see clearly that my path was meant to be a saint, not a mother, no matter what the cost to my body and heart."

Her *ignate* nodded with religious conviction. "But, holiness, how do you stay the pain?"

Fianche tilted her head. The sun was setting brilliantly through the trees. "It is our ultimate sacrifice. It is the mark of a true saint, Lis, patience and silence and thankfulness in the face of supreme suffering."

Lis fell to silence herself, and the two walked on in a journey they had started long ago, but Fianche felt herself shrink smaller, because she knew the truth.

For every day the staff whispered it into her heart that she was no closer to sainthood than she had ever really been before.

The End

Amy R. Butler is a sophomore majoring in English and Theatre studies and minoring in Writing, but she is looking to transfer to a school with a Film Production major. She's always on the look out for a good adventure to switch up the Midwestern lifestyle. "Mark of a Saint" is a prelude story to "The Saintly Fianche of Malitane."

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